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BY

MATTHEW WHITE, JR.

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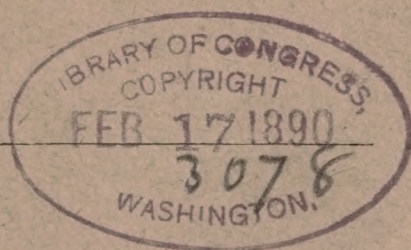
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ERIC DANE.

CHAPTER I.

THE RAILROAD ACCIDENT.

"Is this seat engaged?"

The speaker was a boy of sixteen, inclined to be tall, and very well described by the term "good looking." He was dressed in a neat fitting suit, and in one hand carried a good sized satchel, while the other held an umbrella.

He had entered the car at the last minute before the train left Jersey City, and consequently found nearly all the seats occupied.

The person to whom the question was addressed was also a boy, but one of rather gruff manners, for before replying he favored the speaker with a prolonged stare, then muttered :

"I s'pose not, so I guess you can have it."

"Thank you!" responded the other, adding, "I'll put my bag up in that rack over your head, if you don't mind. It'll be out of the way then."

"I'll sling it up for you," was the rather unexpected rejoinder.

The train was already in motion, so the new comer smilingly accepted the proffered aid and passed over his hand baggage. But the other youth was not quite as tall as he wished to appear ; besides, the bag

was doubtless heavier than he had counted on. The result was that just as he had almost got it safely lodged in the rack, a sudden lurch of the car threw it out, and down it came with a thump on the back of the forward seat.

The latter was occupied by a middle aged lady in a brown straw bonnet and an immense blue waterproof cloak, under which she had been observed to be cherishing some article of the live stock variety.

The unexpected descent of the satchel so close at hand caused the lady to scream, "Sakes o' massy!" and give a start that sent the concealed object out of the waterproof in the shape of an enormous yellow cat. With one spring puss landed across the aisle and had perched on the shoulder of an old gentleman, which of course was enough to set the whole car in an uproar.

Ladies added their screams to those of the cat's mistress and the angry exclamations of the old gentleman.

"Oh, there goes Gideon. Catch him, catch him. He'll jump off and be killed, I know he will!"

"We'll get him for you, ma'am," cried the unlucky cause of the mischief, as, in company with the owner of the bag, he made a swoop for puss, who had finally taken refuge in the corner near the water cooler.

He suffered himself to be captured without much resistance, and the two boys between them bore him back to his mistress with many apologies.

"I say, that was fun, wasn't it?" whispered he of the rough exterior. "Guess we ought to be acquainted now. Where are you going to get off?"

"At Cedarbrook."

"Is that where you live?"

"I don't know yet."

"Don't know! That's queer. Where do you live, then?"

"Nowhere just now."

It was evident that the occupant of the aisle seat thought he was being questioned a little too closely at the hands of an utter stranger. But the latter was a youth who allowed no rules of etiquette to interfere with his desires, and just at present, for the want of something better to pass away the time, he determined to amuse himself by finding out all he possibly could about his seat mate.

And the rather mystifying responses he had already received only whetted his curiosity the more.

"That's funnier yet," he went on. "You've got to live somewhere. Where did you get your breakfast?"

"Off Fire Island."

"Oh, you've been swelling it over in Europe, then?"

No answer.

"I say, if you'll tell me your name, I'll tell you mine. I always like to know who I'm talking to, and so do you, I suppose. Never mind about hunting up a card. Let's have it by word of mouth."

But the other already had his wallet out, and was extending towards his persistent fellow passenger a card bearing the words :

ERIC DANE.

"Oh ; now I'll tell you mine. It's a longer one than that, but I guess you——"

The sentence was never finished. Without a second's warning, the car lurched to one side, rolled over and fell, a heap of splintered wood and twisted metal, in the dry bed of a brook.

One instant of fateful silence there was, and then arose a din of shrieks, and groans and cries, mingled with the shouts of the horror stricken train hands and the escaping steam from the engine.

The latter, with three cars attached, had been

brought to a standstill, safe and sound, on the other side of the bridge ; the broken rail had thrown over only the last two passenger coaches, which now lay motionless in the darkness of the gathering twilight, covering nobody could say how many maimed and mutilated bodies.

But the gloom was all too soon dissipated by a baleful light. The lamps had set fire to the shattered woodwork, and in a very few minutes the scene was illuminated by a glare of fearful portent.

The passengers and railroad employees worked with a will at the task of rescue, but it was little they could do. The brook, as has been said, was dry, and although the engine had already speeded off to the nearest station for help, it was only too evident that before that could arrive the major portion of the overturned cars would be quite consumed.

And what had been the fate of those passengers in whom we are more particularly interested ?

During that fearful downward plunge Eric Dane involuntarily closed his eyes and braced himself for the shock that was sure to come. His seat mate gave one frightful yell and made a dash across his knees toward the aisle. Then the car struck the rocks with a mighty crash, and—Eric found himself lying across the back of a seat, unhurt !

Not only this, but by the air that blew in and fanned his cheek he knew that the opportunity for escape through an open window lay ready at hand.

At the same instant a faint cry for help just behind him reached his ears. It was a girl's voice, and he called out in response :

“Where are you ?”

“Here, right in the aisle. If only that seat was out of the way, I could pull myself through.”

Guided by the sound of the voice, Eric felt his way to the spot, and, by a vigorous wrench, suc-

ceeded in pulling aside the barrier that had kept the unknown one a prisoner.

By this time the groans and cries of those about them were harrowing in the extreme; but trying to close his eyes and ears to all but the one work of rescue he had in hand, Eric stretched out his arm through the opening he had made, and requested the young girl to take hold of it.

This being done, he exerted all his strength, and presently the two were side by side, clinging as best they could to whatever support came to hand.

"Oh, merciful heavens, the car is on fire!" cried the girl the next instant.

"Never fear," replied Eric; "if you will stay where you are for half a minute longer, I will crawl out through the window. That will leave room for you to do the same, and then we can easily escape."

Even as he spoke—for every minute was precious—he caught hold of the window sash, and, as rapidly as the narrowness of the aperture would permit, worked his way out into the open air, sweet with the smell of new mown hay, the odor of which has ever since reminded him of the experiences of that memorable night.

"Now then, once more your hand. I beg pardon if I seem rough, but it will take a little strength."

But the girl was not only extraordinarily cool in the hour of danger, but brave as well. Not one cry did she utter, as giving both hands to our hero, she suffered herself to be drawn through the window, sustaining in the process not a few scratches and bruises.

However, the sight that now revealed itself drew from her an exclamation of horror.

From the manner in which the two derailed cars had been thrown together, it seemed impossible that any of those within them could have escaped with

their lives, and the flames that had burst forth added a fresh element of the terrible to the scene.

The two were now on the upper side of the overturned car. Followed by his companion, Eric sprang down to the ground below, but no sooner was the solid earth reached than the girl amazed him by sinking in a faint at his feet.

The boy hesitated an instant, then stooped down, picked up the unconscious form in his strong young arms, and rapidly bore her from the spot.

But where should he go? His first impulse was merely to get beyond the reach of the flames from the burning cars. Presently he caught sight of a light ahead of him.

It was evidently a lantern in a switchman's box on the bank by the bridge, and exerting the last remnant of a strength that had already been severely taxed, Eric carried his inanimate burden up the steep ascent.

The box was deserted, as was to be expected, with a terrible calamity so close at hand. But there was a pitcher of water on a stand just inside the door, and placing the girl in the chair by the entrance, our hero dashed some of it across her face, and finally succeeded in recalling her to consciousness.

At the same instant something was recalled to his own mind. Setting down the pitcher he thrust his hand into the breast pocket of his coat. It was empty. Then he remembered that he had had the wallet out for the purpose of giving his card to the young stranger who was his seat mate at the very moment when the accident happened.

CHAPTER II.

A FATEFUL POSTPONEMENT.

"HAVE you lost something?" asked the young girl, noting Eric's search through his pockets. "I am so sorry. Perhaps if you had not stopped to help me, you might have had time to secure all your baggage."

"Please don't say that," returned our hero quickly. "It makes it seem as if I thought more of a satchel or pocket book than of a human life. Besides, just see what we have escaped;" and he pointed to the scene of the wreck, from which a vast volume of flame was shooting up into the evening sky.

"Oh, that is terrible!" cried the girl. "Do you think all the passengers have escaped?"

"Had you any friends among them?" replied Eric, evading the question.

"No; I was alone. I was detained in the city very late by a rehearsal. I never came out home after dark by myself before. Father will be wild with anxiety about me, and—and I cannot stay here to see what they may bring from the wreck. Look, those men are carrying something now;" and, covering her face with her hands, the girl started to walk away, although she was as yet scarcely able to stand.

At the same instant an ear piercing whistle sounded close at hand, and a second later the blinding glare of a headlight swept swiftly by.

The girl started back in a new accession of terror, and would have fallen had not Eric sprung forward and caught her.

The next moment the train had stopped, and the two were surrounded by an excited throng of officials and passengers, demanding to know what had happened. But by this time one or two brakemen from the wrecked cars had made their way to the spot, and Eric was relieved of the task of telling the terrible tale.

"Have all the passengers escaped from the last car?" he managed to find an opportunity to inquire.

"I helped a boy out of one of the windows, and an old lady who was crying for her cat out of another," was the brakeman's reply, as he paused for an instant in his quest for an axe. "I'm afraid that's all that got out alive," he added, gravely.

Eric was about to correct him, but before he could explain, the man was off, and our hero's entire attention was claimed by the young girl over whom he found himself thus suddenly placed in the guise of a protector.

"If I could only get home," she murmured, with a shudder, as the agonized cries came from the direction of the burning cars.

"Do you live far from here?" Eric inquired.

"No; my home is in Newark, the next stop on the other side the bridge."

"I will see if we can find some means of getting there," said Eric; and, turning to a passenger from the newly arrived train, he inquired whether he knew of any conveyance they could get that would take them to the neighboring city.

"The railroad is blocked, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes, it is, and will be for an hour or more," was the response; "but the conductor has just told me

that they have telegraphed for right of way to send this train on to Newark by another road."

Eric communicated this intelligence to the young girl, and volunteered to see that she reached her home in safety.

"But it will be taking too much of your time," she objected. "You have been very kind already—oh, that sounds weak, after what you have done for me. Besides, your friends will be troubled about your safety. You ought to go on to them at once."

"Oh, nobody expects me just at this time," replied our hero; "and I can see you home just as well as not. The baggage car is all right, so I need not worry about my luggage. Had you any on the train?"

"Oh, no; I was only in for the afternoon. You are ever so kind. We live near the station, and Newark is only a short distance."

Five minutes later they were seated in the train, which presently began to back down, till it was shunted to another track, on which it had a clear run to Newark.

"Won't this be an adventure to tell Cousin John when I get to Cedarbrook!" mused Eric, as he sat silent beside his charge, who had at once sunk back in her corner of the seat, overcome by a recollection of the terrible scene she had just witnessed, and her own narrow escape. "He probably imagines me still on the Atlantic, that is, if he hasn't had news already of the Mystic's quick passage."

Then a sudden recollection caused Eric to plunge both hands into his trousers pockets. In one of them he found a five dollar bill, and in the other a dollar or two in small change.

This discovery relieved his mind considerably. He had feared that all the money he had brought with him was in that ill fated wallet.

During the short journey Eric had an opportunity of noting the appearance of his companion, who seemed to be about his own age. She had a sad look in her blue eyes, and the hand that supported her golden head was so thin as to be almost transparent. She was neatly but very plainly dressed.

"She said something about having been to a rehearsal," thought Eric. "I wonder if she plays at one of the theaters?"

His cogitations on the subject were cut short by the arrival of the train in Newark. Two minutes later he was electrified to see the young girl leave his side and rush into the arms of a stout old gentleman, in a green and yellow seersucker coat.

"Now, I've done my duty, so I'll hunt up another train for Cedarbrook," muttered our hero.

If he had done this without further delay, what an amount of misery and privation he might have been spared!

He had already turned to enter the waiting room, when he felt himself caught by the sleeve.

"Permit me, my gallant boy, preserver of my daughter, and hero of the hour," exclaimed a sonorous voice, and almost before he knew what had happened, Eric's hand was nearly wrung from his body by the man in the particolored coat. Indeed, so hearty were the greetings of the stout gentleman, that he was obliged to employ his other hand to wipe the perspiration from his brow with his red spotted handkerchief, which he had requested his daughter to take from his pocket for the purpose.

"You will come and dine with us, will you not? The house of Appleby will be honored by your presence."

"You are very kind, Mr.——"

"Appleby—Alonzo Appleby, and this is my daughter Louise. But ah, you have met before, under

strange circumstances, under, I may say, almost coincidental circumstances. But come, we will repair to our humble abode, and there——”

“Excuse me, Mr. Appleby,” Eric here broke in, “but I really must leave you. I trust your daughter will suffer no ill effects from the fearful strain she has undergone this evening;” and, touching his hat to the young lady, our hero made a sudden dash for the waiting room.

“I hope I wasn’t rude,” he said to himself; “but really I must find out what is to become of me to-night.”

“Is there a train from here to Cedarbrook this evening?” he inquired of the station agent.

“Just gone!” was the reply. “No other till 9:30 in the morning.”

“That is exasperating!” muttered Eric, little suspecting how really serious a matter this missing of the train was going to turn out for him. “I suppose I might as well go back to New York and stay all night, or down to Coney Island. Yes, that’s what I’ll do;” and inside of ten minutes he was on a train bound for Jersey City.

All the conversation on the cars was relative to the terrible accident on the other road, and Eric shuddered as he listened to accounts of the burning alive of most of the passengers who had been in that last car, from which he and Louise Appleby had so miraculously escaped.

It was nearly ten o’clock when the ferry boat landed our hero on the New York side of the river, and he debated with himself whether it was worth while to go down to Coney Island at that late hour.

“But I’ve got to put up somewhere tonight,” he told himself, “and I might just as well go down there where it’s cool.”

Taking a paper from his pocket, he consulted it

by the light of an electric lamp in the ferry house, and ascertained that there were still two boats to Manhattan Beach.

Inquiring of a policeman the nearest route to the pier whence they started, he was soon on his way thither, and a quarter of an hour later was being carried past the Statue of Liberty on a Bay Ridge steamboat.

There were very few passengers on the boat, but of the few one was a young fellow of about his own age, who occupied a chair on the forward deck next to himself. Two gentlemen were standing talking together not far off, and presently one of them pointed in the direction of quarantine, where a large ocean steamer was lying at anchor.

The next moment the boy near our hero put his hand in the breast pocket of his coat and drew forth a letter. Now, directly over Eric's head was a lamp, and as the other leaned toward him to allow the light to fall more directly on the page, Eric's eyes chanced to rest on the letter.

He gave a start of astonishment, for he recognized his own handwriting.

"Why, that's my last letter to Fred Marchman," he exclaimed. "How did this fellow ever come to get hold of it?"

CHATER III.

ERIC'S INHERITANCE.

As he sat gazing at the letter in the hand of the boy beside him, a sudden thought struck Eric. Why should not the fellow be Fred Marchman himself? Owing to Eric's residence in Europe for the past ten years, the boys had not seen one another since they were six years old, although as their parents had been very intimate friends, the boys had heard a good deal of each other, and had corresponded at intervals in the meantime.

"I beg your pardon," ventured Eric, touching the other on the arm, "but is not your name Marchman?"

"Yes," was the somewhat startled reply, as the speaker turned to see who was addressing him. The next instant he was on his feet and had seized one of our hero's hands in both his own, with the cry: "Why, Eric Dane, where on earth did you come from?"

"Well, I've come from being on sea for the past six days, but did you know me from my picture? I'm sure I'd never have recognized you from yours."

"What made you speak to me, then? I made sure you were a bunco steerer till I turned around and got the light of that lamp on your face."

"I saw you take out that letter of mine. Do you mean to say you hadn't read it before? You must have got it a week ago."

"Of course I'd read it before, only when I heard two gentlemen wondering what steamer that was lying at quarantine, I took it out of my pocket to see what one you said you were coming on. But you must have made a quick trip. The Mystic wasn't expected in till some time tomorrow."

"We did beat the record, you know. But I'm jolly glad I met you. I missed connections for Cedarbrook, and couldn't get out to Cousin John's, so as he didn't expect the steamer in till tomorrow, and wasn't down at the pier, you're the first soul to welcome me back to my native land. In fact the country doesn't seem to have taken a fancy to me, and has tried to smash me up in a railroad accident already," and he proceeded to relate the experiences that had befallen him earlier in the evening.

"Jingo, Eric!" exclaimed Fred, extending his hand for another shake. "You're quite a hero, rescuing maidens from overturned cars and then escorting them home. I suppose we shall see a full account of your gallantry in the morning papers."

"Indeed you won't. That is unless old Mr. Appleby puts it in, and he doesn't know my name. But what are you doing here at this hour of the night by yourself on your way to Coney Island? Where's the rest of the family?"

"All down at the Oriental. You're coming there, too, of course, to be our guest over night. I can't ask you for any longer, because we're all going off on a yachting cruise to Newfoundland and Labrador. We start tomorrow morning in the Charmer, and I've just been up to get Daisy's diary. She left it on the bureau in her room when we stopped at the house this morning on our way through the city from Greenwich."

"Oh, yes, that's where you go every summer, isn't it? I've heard so much of all these places that I

don't feel a bit like a stranger in the country. But it's too bad of you to go away just as I come."

"Yes I'm no end sorry it happens so, and if it was our yacht, I'd get father to wait till you could get ready to go along; but you see it belongs to his partner, and he's invited the whole family to go on this first cruise."

"How long will you be away?"

"About two months, I think."

"When you come back I suppose I shall be living in New York, although I can't tell you whereabouts."

"That reminds me," exclaimed Fred, taking out the letter again and pointing to the following sentence on the second page: "I've got some astonishing news for you. I've had a fortune left me and am coming over to America to take possession of my property."

"Now please explain," went on Fred. "Who's left you all this money? Is it very much, and have you got the full use of it now, or do you have to wait till you are of age?"

"Very natural questions, and I'll try to answer them all before the boat gets to that pier for which she seems to be aiming."

"Of course you know that I have been living with my Uncle Edward in Liverpool ever since I was left an orphan at seven; but I don't suppose you know that that uncle had a brother Eric in California for whom I was named."

"But why didn't I know it?" Fred persisted. "I see a deep and dark mystery looming up on the horizon of your story. Trot it out, Eric. It isn't a family skeleton, is it?"

"Oh, no, you probably never heard of my Uncle Eric, for the tip top reason that I didn't know there was such a person myself until three months ago."

"But how did you account for your name, then?" Fred wanted to know.

"I thought it was a fancy one. Lots of people have them nowadays."

"Where did this mysterious uncle keep himself all those years, then?"

"In China. You see this was the way of it. He was father's youngest brother and they were very fond of one another, but the year after I was born they had a terrible quarrel over some business matter. My uncle went away, and his name was never mentioned in the family."

"And now he has made a fortune in tea, died and left it all to you. But who is your Cousin John? I didn't know you had any relatives on this side of the water."

"I didn't know anything about him till lately either. You see, we've been a very much scattered family, the few there are of us. He is from somewhere in Canada. His name is Tilbert, and he's only second or third cousin to me, I don't remember which. At any rate, Uncle Eric left him something, too, and put him in charge of my property till I'm twenty one."

"But what becomes of your Uncle Edward in all this domestic upheaval? I should think he would have come over with you."

"That's just it. You know he belongs to the Royal Geographical Society in England, and has just been appointed one of an expedition to push through some investigations in central Australia. He started two days after I did."

"Let me see, he's an old bachelor, isn't he?"

"Yes, so there's nobody left behind. I've been at Eton at school the greater part of the year, and in the vacations uncle and I would travel around."

"But how big is this fortune you've inherited?"

"Something over a million, I believe," answered Eric, modestly.

"Whew!" whistled Fred, getting up with great formality to shake hands with his friend for the third time. "I dare say when I get back from the cruise you'll have a yacht of your own."

"You forget, though, that I'm not to have the use of the money, that is, beyond a regular allowance, until I'm of age. But this isn't Coney Island, surely."

"No, indeed; this is Bay Ridge, where we change to the cars. There's no hurry, though. Plenty of room on this trip. Everybody is going the other way."

The transfer was soon made, and when they were settled in the cars, Fred reverted at once to the absorbing subject of Eric's inheritance by inquiring: "And this Cousin John? What is he like? A young fellow or a married man with a family?"

"He's married and has two boys, of ten and twelve. You must know that Uncle Eric came back to this country about five years ago and invested part of his fortune in government bonds and real estate. Among other property, he purchased a very handsome country place at Cedarbrook, about fifteen miles from New York. That is where Cousin John and his family are now living, and where I expected to be at this minute, if it hadn't been for that accident. By the way, I forgot to tell you that I lost my satchel, umbrella and wallet, with letters from Cousin John and other particulars about the inheritance. I had to stop at a drug store in New York and buy a pocket comb."

"It's lucky you met me, then. You can come right into my room at the hotel, and I can lend you anything you want. Won't the family be surprised when I walk in with you, and announce that I've

captured the hero of Newark meadows and the heir to Chinese Dane's fortune! By the way, I hope you won't be too swell to look at a fellow when I come back."

"What nonsense! Aren't you the only friend I've got in America? But you'll be going to college in the autumn, won't you?"

"Yes, to Harvard. What are you going to do?"

"I may go there, too. What glorious sport!"

And then the two felt to chatting on football, tennis, baseball and Cicero, until the cars ran up beside the tumbling surf, and the conductor called out "Manhattan Beach."

Eric was received most hospitably by the Marchmans, who remembered him as a little boy.

Many plans were made for jolly times during the winter by Fred and his sister Daisy. The latter became greatly interested in Louise Appleby, when she heard about the accident.

It was very late when our hero retired, and equally so when he and Fred awoke on the following morning.

"I ought to telegraph to Cousin John," said Eric while they were dressing. "When he sees that the Mystic has arrived he won't know what has become of me."

"But you'll be out there before lunch yourself," returned his friend, "and the way they manage deliveries in some places, you'll arrive about as soon as the message."

So Eric did not telegraph, but passed an exciting morning seeing his friends off on their long pleasure trip. He had an opportunity to explore the yacht Charmer from stem to stern, and then at noon was rowed ashore with other friends of the two families.

He took the steamboat back to New York, and in the course of half an hour was once more seated in a train bound for Cedarbrook.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUSINS MEET.

THERE were not many passengers aboard the train, and each was absorbed in the newspaper accounts of the previous evening's frightful accident on the road over which they were now traveling. Eric bought a *Herald*, and was thrilled with horror as he read the story of the full extent of the disaster.

"The great majority of those in the ill fated last car were burned beyond recognition," ran the description. "Indeed, their friends will be deprived even of the poor consolation of according their remains Christian burial, so completely were they cremated before the flames were subdued. As a matter of fact, so inadequate were the facilities for extinguishing it, that the fire burned on until there was literally nothing further left for it to feed upon. Not for many years has so appalling a railroad catastrophe occurred in this vicinity. Although, of course, no accurate estimate of the number of lives lost can now be given, it is safe to say that it is not far from forty."

Further on our hero read that "a brave rescue of a young girl, Miss Louise Appleby, was made by a young man whose name could not be learned. Miss Appleby is a young actress of great promise, who has been selected by the management of the Square Theater to fill the role of the blind girl in their forthcoming production of 'Fairfield Farm.'"

The scene of the accident, Eric was glad to find, had been passed while he was reading, and he now concentrated all his thoughts on Cedarbrook, where the train presently drew up.

It proved to be a small place, made up principally of suburban villas of wealthy men from the city. Situated on a high plateau, with a small sized mountain rearing itself picturesquely in the background, and provided with neatly macadamized roads, flag walks and fine overarching trees, the first impression made by the village, if such it could be called, was a most favorable one.

Eric was the only passenger to leave the cars at this stop, and as no one was to be seen about the neat little station, he stood for an instant on the platform, undecided which way to turn.

"But of course I couldn't expect Cousin John to be here to meet me, as I failed to send him word," he told himself. Then, turning to the old man who was raising the gates that guarded the track crossing, he inquired:

"Can you tell me which way to get to the Dane place?"

"Mr. Tilbert's you mane?"

"Yes."

"Keep up this strate till ye come to the big elm tree, and there it's on your right hand side. Shure, an' that's a sad happening to the family, sir."

"Sad happening?" exclaimed Eric, in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Shure, an' haven't ye heard?" and the old Irishman left his gate to come over to where our hero was standing on the sidewalk, in the shade.

"Heard what?"

Eric began to grow interested.

"Why, about the turrible accident on the railroad last night, an' how young Mr. Eric Dane, Mr. Til-

bert's cousin, that was a comin' over from England to live with him, was aboard the train and burnt intoirely to nothing, along with the other onfortunates in the last car."

"How did you hear this?" asked our hero, so astounded by the intelligence that he never thought of contradicting it, and was only intent on finding out further particulars.

While the gatekeeper, glad of so interested a listener, went on with his story, Eric stepped back to lean against the fence.

"Why, it's all over the place," the old man continued. "The news was brought late last night by a young lad I see myself when he got off the train, with his arm in a sling and his face all scratches. He inquired the way to Mr. Tilbert's, the same as you've been after doin' yourself, and their coachman told me this mornin' that that young chap had been settin' in the same seat with poor Mr. Eric. He'd just handed over his card—they two young fellers being quick to get acquainted, you know—when the cars rolled over. He managed to crawl out o' one o' the winders just afore the fire got to him, and picked up poor young Mr. Eric's pocket book and found letters in it from Mr. Tilbert. So he came up here last night with the news."

But Eric did not wait to hear any more. Turning quickly, he almost ran up the street in the direction pointed out by the old gatekeeper.

"How cruel of me to allow this terrible blunder to be made!" he said to himself. "How much anxiety and grief I could have saved them by a telegram! Still, how was I to know that that boy who sat next to me would come here?"

In less than five minutes he reached the big elm tree, and turning in at a handsome stone gateway, hastened up the graveled drive to the house.

The latter was a modern structure of the Queen Anne type and very attractive in appearance, while the lawns, flower beds and shrubbery on the grounds about it were all kept in the most perfect order.

"What a grateful fellow I should be," thought Eric, as he noted all these points, "to feel that I have been spared from the fate that overtook so many last night, to enjoy the comforts of a home like this!"

No one was to be seen about the place, and all the shutters of the house were closed. Eric could not forbear a slight shudder, as he reflected on the possible import of this darkening. He glanced nervously to the right of the front door, expecting to see crape fastened to the bell handle.

But the electric button was free from any such ominous drapery, and as our hero stepped upon the piazza and pressed his finger to it, his heart began to throb with quickened beat.

The door was opened by a solemn Swedish butler.

"Is Mr. Tilbert at home?" said Eric.

"Yes, sir."

"Will you please hand me a card, and I will write my name for you to take up to him?"

The man stepped to the drawing room, selected a card from the twenty or thirty in a silver salver on a table near the door and returned with it to Eric. The latter drew his pencil from his pocket, and after running it through the engraved name—that of some lady—wrote as follows: "Cousin John: I was not hurt in last night's accident. Have heard of the report you have received, and have turned up as large as life to contradict it.

ERIC DANE."

"If you will kindly hand that to Mr. Tilbert," he said, "I will wait on the piazza."

Five minutes passed and no sound had come from within. Eric began to grow impatient.

He was tired, dusty and hot, and anxious to get to his room. Of course this was his own house, but still it was necessary to observe a little formality in taking possession of his apartments, especially as the other occupants believed him to be dead.

But at last a step sounded on the tiling in the hall, not a quick one, as Eric naturally supposed would be that with which his cousin would come to greet him, but a slow, almost reluctant tread, as though the walker would rather be going in the opposite direction.

Eric rose and stretched out his hand, as a man of about thirty five stepped from the doorway on to the piazza.

"You see, Cousin John, I wasn't—" he began, then stopped abruptly, as the other simply stood facing him, taking no notice of his outstretched hand and with no shadow of a smile on his grave countenance.

"I beg your pardon," Eric added after a second, concluding that the gentleman must be a guest of the family; "I thought you were Mr. Tilbert."

"So I am," said the other, and then our hero noticed that he held in his hand the card handed him by the butler. "I am Mr. John Tilbert, and am at a loss to know," (holding up the card) "how any person can have the hardihood to come here at such a time, and attempt such an imposition."

"Imposition!" Eric ejaculated.

All his strength seemed to have left him, and he sank back on the chair almost like one in a swoon.

"Yes, imposition," repeated Mr. Tilbert, tearing the card into small pieces as he spoke, and dropping them to the floor of the piazza. "My cousin, Eric Dane, met with a most shocking death only last night, and knowing him to be the heir to vast wealth, and that he was not personally known to me, you have undertaken the bold scheme of impersonating him.

What proofs have you to show me to substantiate your claim?"

Proofs! The word fell on Eric's ear almost like a knell, for what could he reply? All the letters, statements, and memoranda relating to himself and his inheritance were in that wallet, and that was now in the possession of Mr. Tilbert. Like a flash of lightning the realization of the whole dastardly plot to rob him of his inheritance flashed over the boy.

His silence was fatal, he knew, yet what could he do? He was absolutely helpless, caught fast in the toils of this man, whose crime seemed almost too monstrous for belief.

"Aha, you are dumb!" said the other. "You should have had some sort of a story ready. But why do I waste my time with you? You are an impostor. Go!"

CHAPTER V.

CAST ADRIFT.

By this time Eric had recovered somewhat from the shock Mr. Tilbert's astounding course of action had given him. He now began to rally his forces for an assertion of his rights.

"Mr. Tilbert," he began, you know that I am your cousin, Eric Dane, as well as you know that there is a sun in the sky."

"You are impudent, boy," was the other's retort. "I have told you once to leave the grounds. Do you wish me to use force to put you off?"

"I will go—presently. Although I have as good a right here, and better, than yourself, I did not come prepared to assert that right by force. To do so requires a little preparation. But before I go, I would like to ask you what proofs the boy who was here last night gave you to convince you that he was correct in announcing my death?"

"I decline to discuss the matter with you. I have said that you are an impostor, seeking to foist yourself into the shoes of a young man known to be the heir to an immense property, and who met an untimely fate while on his way to take possession of it. Whether you crossed with him in the steamer, or were a chance traveling companion in the train, I neither know nor care to know. My time is valuable, so you will oblige me by acknowledging your

defeat and retiring at once ;” and with these words Mr. Tilbert, who had taken out a cigar, coolly lighted it, stepped off the piazza, and sauntered away toward the stables.

To follow him was our hero’s first impulse, then his pride rebelled.

“Press myself on such a man, beg him to take me in as though I were a tramp!” he muttered to himself. “Never! It is impossible that he can succeed in establishing such a preposterous claim. The law will see me righted, and mete out such punishment as the crime deserves. But now I must get away somewhere and think quietly. It has all been so sudden, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky.”

With no definite idea where he was going, or just what he proposed to do, Eric walked rapidly down the drive to the gate. As he reached the latter a sudden thought struck him.

“That fellow in the train!” he exclaimed to himself, at the same instant breaking into a run for the station. “If I can get him and bring him here to confront this precious cousin of mine, that will be all the proof I want. If I can only find him!”

He had resolved on inquiring at the station for what point the unknown youth had bought his ticket after his call at the Tilberts’.

It was now between one and two o’clock, almost the hottest time of the day, and the perspiration was pouring down Eric’s face in streams when he reached the railroad.

Fearful lest a train bound for the point he wished to reach might come along at any instant, he rushed into the waiting room and up to the ticket window.

“Do you remember selling a ticket late last night,” he pantingly inquired of the agent, “to a young fellow about my size in a brown suit, a straw hat, and—and——”

Eric paused, partly to recover breath, principally because he could think of no other terms in which to describe the appearance of his seat mate in that ill fated car.

"Well, I can easily answer your question," laughed the man behind the window. "I didn't sell a ticket to anybody after 7:30 last night. People don't travel much in the cars from this station after dark. What's up? Has your house been robbed?"

"Oh, no," faintly responded Eric, turning away to drop into a seat near the door.

He was sadly disappointed.

What could have become of the fellow? Perhaps he was at the Tilberts'. That, however, was very improbable. It might be that he lived in Cedarbrook, although he had not mentioned the fact when Eric spoke of that as being his own destination.

"Perhaps that old gateman will know something about it," was the thought that now occurred to him.

The man recognized him at once, and greeted him with, "An' I suppose now that Mr. Tilbert do be all broke up over this terrible occurrence. An' may I inquire whether you be yourself a relative of that young man's?"

"Well, I'm rather a close connection of his," was Eric's answer. Even in the distracted state of mind in which he was plunged, he could not forbear a bitter smile as he uttered the words.

The old Irishman noticed it, and was not a little shocked.

"He might show more respect for the dead even if they can't find any remains to hould a funeral over," he said to himself.

Ignorant of the horror he had caused, Eric went on hurriedly: "You remember the young fellow you told me about a little while ago? The one that brought the news of my——"

He checked himself abruptly. He had been about to say "my death." He remembered just in time that he must be careful, if he did not wish to be taken for an escaped lunatic.

"I mean the boy who came to Mr. Tilbert's and told him about the accident," he went on. "Well, I would like to know if you can tell me whether he lives here in Cedarbrook, or anywhere near?"

"Well, thin, I don't know anything about him," was the sharp retort of the gateman, and there was such a marked contrast in his manner to what it had been but a short time previous, that Eric could not but be sensible of the change.

"All Cedarbrook seems to be in league against me," he murmured, as he turned again toward the waiting room.

Poor fellow! Could he be expected to realize that he had himself brought about the alteration in the old Irishman's manner by his apparent lack of respect for the dead?

"Can you tell me where I can find a hotel?" he inquired, presenting himself once more at the ticket window.

"Certainly," was the brisk response. "Cross the track and follow Wentworth Avenue till you come to a big red barn. Just opposite you will see a path running off into the woods. That'll be a short cut to the Bluff House."

Eric thanked the man, and lost no time in following the directions given. He was growing faint with hunger, as he had had no opportunity of getting anything to eat since breakfasting at Manhattan Beach.

How long ago that seemed, when he was so gay and full of spirits with his friends, planning for the good times they would all have during the winter! But setting his teeth a little closer together, Eric determined not to think of the past.

"What I've got to do now," he told himself, "is to keep up my spirits, and fight for my rights."

At this point he happened to be passing a pretty Queen Anne cottage, in front of which stood a carriage and a wagon load of trunks. Eric passed just as a gentleman, after locking the front door, joined a lady at the gate.

"Now, Herbert, are you sure the house will be safe without a soul in it while we are away?" Eric heard the latter say: "Those shutters look so frail. If we could only have got Bridget to stay!"

"Nonsense, Edna," was the gentleman's response. "We are to be gone only a week."

That was all Eric heard, and he gave no special attention to it at the time. Indeed, his mind was so full of his own troubles that there was little space in it for the worries of other people. He kept on his way, and presently entered the narrow path that led through the woods toward the Bluff House.

He had gone a considerable distance without seeing any signs of the other end, and was regretting that he had not inquired of the man at the station just how far it was, when a gruff voice startled him.

"Will you oblige a poor man with a few pennies for a sup of dinner?" it said.

Its owner had stepped out from behind a tree. And what a man! His hat was riddled with holes, his coat was nothing but a mass of patches of various sizes and colors; his trousers, which had once been gray, but were now the color of the earth, were tied about his waist with a string, and were of varying length, the short leg vanishing into a boot that looked as if it might have been fished out of an ash barrel, while the long leg was not quite long enough to make close connection with a disreputable gaiter.

“No, I’m not exactly a pretty boy, leastways not under present circumstances, nor what you would call a dude, by my clothes, but I’m hungry all the same, and I want money,” and the man gave his outstretched hand an unpleasantly close hitch towards Eric’s chin.

CHAPTER VI.

A PECULIAR TRAMP.

"I have nothing for you," said Eric. "I am hungry myself."

"Well, then," coolly suggested the tramp, "invite me to dinner with you. I won't stand on no ceremony. It's daytime, and I can git along without my swaller tail."

"The fellow must be crazy," thought our hero, and he started to hurry on without vouchsafing any reply.

But the man was evidently resolved to make the best of the lonely locality in which the chance encounter had come about. Taking a step nearer Eric, he stretched out three of his dirty fingers and began to toy with our hero's watch chain in an off hand way, as though he were a familiar friend who felt himself entitled to take liberties.

Eric drew back so sharply that his watch, a handsome gold one, a present on his sixteenth birthday, slid from his pocket.

The tramp caught it dexterously, and, slipping it back in its place, leered unpleasantly as he patted Eric on the shoulder, and warningly remarked: "You'd oughter be more careful, my young friend, how you show off your wallybles in lonely spots like this."

"Let me go, I say," cried Eric, making a desperate effort to free himself from the grasp of this un-

welcome acquaintance. But the man had a grip like iron.

"I've took a fancy to you, young feller," he went on, "and as long you won't invite me to dinner along of you, where we could do our chattin' peaceable like, I'll invite you to set down alongside of me on this tree trunk and rest yourself awhile. I know you must be clean tuckered out and hotter'n pepper."

As he spoke, the tramp passed his other arm around our hero's back, and forced him to sit down on a log that lay on the edge of the path.

This was the last straw. Eric, weary, warm, sick at heart almost, was in no humor to be trifled with.

The next instant, conquering his aversion to touching the man, he drew back his arm suddenly, and, before the tramp could guess at his intentions, had planted a ringing blow in the man's face, directly between his eyes.

The fellow reeled for an instant, but never relaxed his hold on Eric's left arm.

"Better yet," he exclaimed. "I do like to see a proper spirit in a youngster of your years. That hurt now, I can tell you, and it does you proud, and makes me surer than I was afore that a brave 'un like you ain't a goin' to yell for help when a gentleman stops him in the woods just to have a little chat."

"Is that all you want?" panted our hero. The tramp's fashion of taking such a blow as he had just given him was so peculiar that for an instant Eric forgot his animosity in amazement.

"Isn't that what I've been telling you all along?" was the reply. "An' it is my high regard for a youngster of your pluck that hinders me from havin' you run in."

"Run in?" repeated Eric, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes ; jailed, snapped up by the cops for 'sault and battery."

"Oh, I see. But you attacked me," our hero began, then checked himself. How absurd it was to be trying to exonerate himself for having resisted insult at the hands of a tramp!

"Oh, attacked you, did I?" chuckled the other. "Will you be so kind as to point to any mark on your person of the likes o' this lump atween my eyes? Come, now, what did I do to you?"

"You used force to keep me from going on my way," replied Eric ; "and—well, you're about the coolest tramp I ever saw or heard of."

"Well, I must be purty comfortable, then, this weather. But come now, let's talk about how we can compromise this here matter. How much will you fork over?"

"If you don't take your hands off me," began Eric, disregarding the question, "I'll——"

"Hush !" hissed the tramp in his ear, accompanying the warning with such a severe pressure on his arm that no second command was needed.

That which had caused the sudden exclamation was the appearance of a boy on a bicycle, coming along the path from the direction of the red barn. His rubber tired wheels made no sound, and the consequence was that he was close to the ill assorted couple on the log before they knew of his approach.

The path was a narrow one, and, as trees bordered it closely on either side, there was no possibility for the young rider to turn out to avoid the obstruction which the feet of the tramp presented. The log was close to the path, and when he sat down behind Eric, the man had stretched his legs out comfortably in front of him.

This being the position of affairs, a "header" was unavoidable. But the boy was evidently used to

taking them, and, as the wheel came with a dull thud against the tramp's boot, he took his hands from the steering bar and put them out in front of him, ready to clutch the ground as he was sent flying in a neat curve through the air.

"Look a here, my son," exclaimed the tramp, rubbing his leg with one hand while he tried to disentangle himself from the bicycle with the other, "do you want to be run in for runnin' over honest folks in this permiscuous manner? Come here, and take this infernal machine of yours off, will you?"

Eric, who had been thus unexpectedly set free, lost no time in springing to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" he inquired of the boy, as he assisted the latter to rise.

"Not a bit. It's lucky, though, I wasn't going very fast. Hope my machine isn't broken;" and the youthful wheelman, who looked to be not over thirteen, hastened to raise his steed of steel.

The tramp grumbled a good deal as, by the united efforts of Eric and its rider, the bicycle was lifted off his leg, but went no further in his manifestation of hostility.

"I guess I won't mount again," said the boy, as he asked Eric to hold his machine while he dusted the dirt from his knickerbockers. "There are a lot of roots running across the path just above here, so I'd have got off before I got to the hotel, any way."

"I'll walk along with you, then," said our hero. "I'm not quite sure of the way."

"Come along, I'll show you," responded the boy, and the two started off.

The tramp made no attempt either to detain or follow them.

"You'll hear from me again, young fellow," Eric heard him sullenly mutter. The next moment he was hidden from sight by a bend in the path.

CHAPTER VII.

PERCY TILBERT.

THERE could, perhaps, be no greater contrast in appearance than that between the two companions with whom our hero had met by chance during the past quarter of an hour—the tramp and the young cyclist.

The latter was a bright faced, handsome lad, neatly dressed in a tennis suit of blue and white. In his left hand he carried a racquet, of which Eric presently offered to relieve him, as the numerous twists of the path rendered the guiding of the machine quite an absorbing task.

“Thanks,” said the boy, as he handed it over. “I can manage it better when I’m riding than I can this way. I s’pose I oughtn’t to play today any way, but it’s a match game and my name was down. Besides, it isn’t as if there was to be a funeral.”

Eric looked mystified, as well he might.

“Oh, but I forgot—you don’t know about it,” went on the boy, adding : “I’d like to hear what you think, so I’ll tell you how it is.”

He rested his chin on the saddle as he pushed his wheel slowly along, and looking gravely up into our hero’s face continued thus :

“You see, there was a cousin of mine, about your age, I should think, coming to live with us. He’d been staying over in England for ever so many years, and none of our family had ever seen him. Well, we expected him yesterday—or today, I mean—but the

steamer got in ahead of time and he started to come out here on that train that fell off the bridge last night. And a chap came to our house about nine o'clock with his pocketbook and told us he'd been sitting next to him in the last car, and that Eric—that's my cousin, you know—must have been roasted alive. Wasn't it awful? And Everett—he's my brother—says I oughtn't to play today. What do you think?"

As a matter of fact, Eric was thinking so busily that he scarcely heard the question. How strange that chance should have thrown in his way this boy, who was without doubt his cousin, Percy Tilbert, one of the sons of the man who had deliberately undertaken to keep him out of his rights!

What should he do? Ought he to declare himself to this boy, and endeavor to convince him that he was no impostor, but the veritable Cousin Eric whom they had been expecting, and for whose death the small boy's conscience evidently told him he should be at that moment mourning?

But this course would, in case our hero succeeded, involve the destroying of a son's respect for his parent, and this it seemed a cruel thing to do. Here was, however, an opportunity to learn the particulars of the way in which the news of his supposed death had been announced to Mr. Tilbert.

"Are you sure your cousin was killed, though?" Eric inquired, after an instant's reflection. "Perhaps he succeeded in getting out of the car in the same way that this other young fellow, who brought you the news, must have done. He may turn up yet."

"Do you think he will?" exclaimed the other, his face brightening. "But then this other chap seemed so certain that he hadn't got out. He was awfully frightened himself."

"Does he live in Cedarbrook?" inquired Eric, so eagerly that the boy seemed a little surprised.

"No," he answered, "but I guess it can't be very far off, because father sent the coachman to drive him home last night."

"And you don't know his name?" went on Eric in a voice that he strove hard to keep steady.

"I forget it. It was a funny one with a McQuirl or something like that in it. Why, do you know him?"

"I've seen him," admitted Eric. "And I'd like very much to see him again. But isn't that the Bluff House just ahead?"

Our hero was glad to make this diversion in a conversation that was beginning to grow embarrassing.

"Yes, and that's Charley and the rest waiting for me," responded the boy, as he waved his cap and gave vent to a private signal whistle.

"You're going to stay at the hotel, aren't you?" he added, turning to our hero. "Come and see us play; don't you want to?"

"I will as soon as I get my dinner," returned our hero, whose spirits had been wonderfully revived by his encounter with young Tilbert. He felt assured that he would now have but little trouble in ascertaining the whereabouts of that train companion of his who had been the cause of placing him in his present awkward predicament.

Leaving Percy with his young friends on the lawn, Eric presented himself at the office, engaged a room, and after refreshing himself with a bath, disposed of a hearty dinner, by which time it was four o'clock.

"I must see the Tilberts' coachman," he said to himself, as he sauntered out on the lawn to watch the spirited tournament going on between the boy tennis players of the hotel and those of the cottages in the neighborhood.

He had conceived a strong fancy for Percy Tilbert, and it seemed impossible to believe that he was the son of his father.

"Yet, who knows?" mused Eric, in the enthusiasm of his newborn hope. "Perhaps the man really and truly believes me to be an impostor. But if I can once get hold of that fellow with a McQuirl to his name, things will soon be settled one way or the other."

Indeed, so encouraging did the outlook appear to him that when presently Percy came running up to announce that he had won the singles, and to ask him if he didn't want to play a set with him, he consented at once.

Eric was thoroughly at home on the tennis court, and spent the remainder of the afternoon very agreeably in a trial of skill with the young players, with whom he speedily became on the best of terms.

Percy remained to tea with his friend Charley Shaw, and having arranged to loan him his bicycle till the next afternoon, started to walk home about seven o'clock.

"I'll go along with you to fight the tramp and find out the name of that McQuirl somebody or other," volunteered Eric.

The boy gladly accepted his company and the two struck into the path through the wood. They had just reached the other end of it when Eric suddenly halted, and catching Percy by the arm, exclaimed in a low voice: "Didn't you see that shutter move on that cottage?"

"Yes, but what of it? That's the Andersons', and the girl is only shutting the blinds."

"But there isn't anybody home," exclaimed Eric, and he went on to relate the scrap of conversation he had overheard between the husband and wife early in the afternoon.

"Perhaps that's what that tramp was loafing around for," suggested Percy. "Just as likely as not he's taken this time when everybody is at home for supper to pry open a window and slip in. He's afraid somebody will come around to mount guard after dark."

"I suppose we ought to find out," said Eric. "Are there any policemen in Cedarbrook?"

"There's a constable, but I don't know where he lives. I'll tell you what to do. I'll go to the front door and ring the bell, and you can stand by that window and see if the tramp jumps out. If it should happen to be any of the Andersons they'll come to the door."

"Not a bad idea," commented Eric. Taking out his knife, he stepped back to the woods, cut a stout stick for himself and then the two proceeded to carry out Percy's plan.

They struck across the lawn toward the Anderson cottage, and while the younger boy went around to the front, Eric took up his stand near the window at which the movement had been observed, and which was in the rear of the house.

The next instant the electric bell began to sound, and a second later the shutters were thrown open and the ugly visage of the tramp appeared.

He was in the act of jumping out when he caught sight of Eric.

He at once sprang back and vanished. Impulsively our hero darted forward, and putting his hand on the window sill, vaulted lightly into the room in pursuit.

Scarcely had he done so when the tramp sprang from a corner where he had been concealed, and, throwing his arms about Eric's shoulders, held him fast.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRESH HUMILIATION.

ERIC knew by experience that it would be worse than useless to attempt to escape from the grasp of the tramp by struggling. Besides, there was Percy Tilbert still ringing the front door bell. He would certainly come around to the window in a few minutes, and help Eric to get free.

But to our hero's astonishment the tramp now began walking him off in the direction of the front door.

"It ain't perlite to keep folks a waitin'," he said. "So we'll let 'em in, whoever it is, an' give ourselves up peaceable. It's purty warm to be trampin' about the country these days, so a nice cool cell will come in handy fer a month or two. We'll try an' persuade the judge ter let us room together, me boy, so's we can go on with our interestin' conversation—why, hullo, if here ain't the very kid that interrupted it!"

This last exclamation was elicited when the tramp drew back the bolts and opened the door to discover Percy on the other side of it.

At the same moment a gentleman driving by in a buggy drew up his horse and called out, "Percy is that you? I was coming after you. What are you doing here?"

Eric looked up and saw that the man, who had now alighted and was fastening his horse to a hitching post, was none other than his cousin, John Tilbert.

Doubtless emboldened by the presence of his parent, Percy, after calling out to the latter, "Come here, quick, father," laid his arm on Eric's arm, and addressing himself to the tramp, went on: "What are you holding on to my friend for? Let go of him."

"Oh, here's another high strung lad for us!" answered the man of rents and patches, seeming in no wise disconcerted by the advent of Mr. Tilbert on the scene.

On the contrary, he advanced down the path to meet him, dragging the unwilling Eric along with him.

By this time Mr. Tilbert had come up, and Eric noticed that a peculiar look flashed across his face when he first recognized who it was that the tramp had beside him. It was an expression in which surprise mingled with triumph and satisfaction, the latter predominating.

Percy was trying to explain how he and Eric had laid a trap to capture the would be burglar, but his father motioned to him to be silent.

"We give ourselves up," began the tramp. "It ain't no use buttin' agin the law any longer, is it, pard?"

"How dare you couple yourself with me in this manner?" cried Eric, provoked beyond all bounds by the cool insolence of the vagabond. "Your own son will explain to you, Mr. Tilbert," he went on, "how we discovered this man in the act of robbing this house, and that I sprang in through the dining room window to capture him."

"An' perhaps that boy will explain, too," put in the tramp, "how he saw us a sittin' together like two brothers on a log in the woods a plannin' this werry robbery."

"What an outrageous falsehood!" exclaimed Eric.

"Is that so, Percy?" sharply queried Mr. Tilbert, turning to his son. "Where did you meet this young man? Who is he, and what name did he give you?"

"I don't know his name," answered the boy, an anxious look coming over his face; "I never thought to ask him. I was riding up to the Bluff House through the woods on my bicycle, when I ran over that man's leg and took a header. And this other one picked me up and went on with me to the hotel. We played tennis together, and then, when I lent my machine to Charley Shaw, he offered to walk home with me."

"And was he sitting with this—this man, when you first saw him in the woods?" asked Mr. Tilbert. His tone was a stern one, and his heavy eyebrows met in a frown above his nose as he put the question.

"I—I don't know. I'm not quite sure. I hadn't time to see much before I took my tumble," replied the boy gravely, conscious that somehow his testimony was going to get his unknown, but admired friend into trouble. Then, suddenly brightening up, he added: "But he says that perhaps Cousin Eric wasn't killed after all."

At this mention Mr. Tilbert frowned more severely than ever, and, catching Percy by the hand, drew him aside with the command: "Go out and get into the buggy; you must never speak to this young man again. He is a rascal. That is all you need know at present. I will deal with both of these fellows."

Poor Eric! What could he say to prevent this misconception, of his character from taking root in the boy's mind? Circumstances did certainly appear to be against him, for he could not deny that he had been sitting with the tramp in the woods. Of course he could explain how it came about, but of what avail was his simple word with such a man as he now knew his cousin John Tilbert to be? And

how could he expect a son to disregard his father's wishes?

But he now became conscious that John Tilbert was addressing him.

"I cannot say I am surprised to meet you again under these circumstances," he was saying.

"Umph!" muttered the tramp, evidently not a little astonished at the ease he was having in carrying out his scheme of vengeance against Eric for the blow the latter had given him.

"It is without doubt my duty to hand you over to the authorities," went on Mr. Tilbert; "but in consideration of your youth I will let you off if you will promise to leave Cedarbrook—both of you, I mean," turning for an instant toward the tramp, who stood regarding him with open mouthed amazement.

Eric silently ground his teeth. To be treated in this fashion by the man who was robbing him of his inheritance, and he helpless as a babe! It was maddening, but by a supreme effort the boy controlled himself. It could not be possible that this iniquitous plot could succeed in the end. He would bide his time.

Meanwhile it was important that his character in the eyes of the world should be kept as free from suspicion as possible; so, humiliating as it seemed, he forced himself to bow his head in token of acceptance of Mr. Tilbert's clemency.

"Mind you," repeated the latter, "the conditions are that you both take yourselves out of the place at once. Now be off. Wait there, Percy, while I close this house up."

During the interview with Mr. Tilbert, the tramp had relinquished his hold on our hero's arm, and Eric took care that he should not again have a chance to renew it. Turning quickly, he vaulted over the low fence and was several yards down the street in

the direction of the station before his would be companion realized that he had given him the slip.

"Well, this is a brilliant fashion for a fellow to enter into an inheritance of a million or so," murmured Eric to himself as he paused to recover breath. "What would Fred say to all this? And where am I to go next? Jove, though, I mustn't go at all without paying my bill at the hotel. I won't, either; and what's more, I'll stay here till morning, too. Then off to New York to see a lawyer. But there's my trunk."

A sudden idea in connection with this latter caused him to go through all his pockets, turning them inside out in the hope of coming across the bit of metal entitling him to receive the piece of baggage marked "Eric Dane, Liverpool."

But it was not forthcoming, and he was forced to conclude that it, too, had been in that ill fated wallet which might better a thousand times have been burned to ashes than that it should have been preserved to fall into the hands of John Tilbert.

"He must have my trunk at his house," Eric muttered, with a wrathful grinding of his heel into the earth. "Why, he is no better than a thief, if he keeps it, and of course he can't give it up without acknowledging by the act that I have some claim on him."

And now the project to obtain an audience with his seat mate had been upset. Since that encounter at the Anderson cottage it would be extremely hazardous to attempt to enter the grounds and obtain an interview with the Tilberts' coachman. Verily it seemed that with every movement Eric did but plunge into fresh difficulties.

Meanwhile, he must support himself in some way, while devising means for ascertaining the whereabouts of the boy whose name began with a McQuirl.

A train had just halted at the station, and while Eric stood leaning against a tree by the roadside, looking off down the valley at the sunset, and wondering how this strange chapter of his life was going to end, he became aware of a sound of puffing drawing nearer and nearer to him up the hill. The next moment he turned to confront Mr. Alonzo Appleby and his daughter, Louise.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNLOOKED FOR OPENING.

"WHY, Louise, look, my dear! Have we not before us the young gentleman who so courageously— -- to be sure we have," and noting the smile of assent and recognition in his daughter's eyes, Mr. Appleby seized Eric by the hand and gave him another of those very emphatic greetings which invariably necessitated the application of the red spotted handkerchief to his rubicund countenance.

Our hero took off his hat and expressed his pleasure at the meeting.

"Are you living here in Cedarbrook, Mr. ——Mr. ——?" went on the old gentleman, when he had recovered the breath he had expended so profusely.

"Dane," interposed Eric. "My name is Eric Dane;" and as he spoke, how earnestly did he wish that he had given it the previous evening. Perhaps in that case he might have been able to prove his identity by these acquaintances.

Mr. Appleby and his daughter both started on hearing the name.

"Why, how can that be, my young friend?" exclaimed the former, stopping short (for they had all three been walking on in the direction of the Bluff House) to gaze at our hero with every evidence of the deepest astonishment. Then, taking a Newark paper from his pocket, he folded it to a certain paragraph and handed it to Eric to read, tapping the

sheet with a fat forefinger and a wise nod of the head, as though to say: "There, are you sure your name is Eric Dane now?"

Eric took the paper with almost breathless eagerness, and holding it so as to catch the last rays of the fading sunset, read as follows:

SAD FATE OF THE HEIR TO THE DANE FORTUNE.

Among the passengers on the ill fated train was Eric Dane, a youth of sixteen, who had just arrived from Europe and was on his way to Cedarbrook to take possession of the fortune left him by his uncle, Mr. Eric F. Dane, whose country seat at that place has excited so much admiration.

"I am Eric Dane, nevertheless," said our hero, when he had finished the foregoing. "It is all a mistake, but an unlucky one for me."

Then he briefly told the whole story, concluding with these words: "And now Mr. Appleby, you are at liberty to decide for yourself whether you will believe Mr. John Tilbert or me. But I can say this much, if I'm not Eric Dane I'd like to know very much who else I am."

"You amaze, I may say you overwhelm me," ejaculated Mr. Appleby, standing off to take Eric in from hat to shoes, as though he was mentally measuring him for a new suit. "How is it possible for this cousin to claim that you have been killed when he sees you standing alive before him?"

"But we never saw one another before, you must remember," replied Eric. "All the letters and other documents proving my identity were in my wallet, and that Mr. Tilbert has in his possession. He also has my trunk, and I am left with what you see me in and a few dollars in money that I happened to have in my pockets when that unlucky car tipped over."

"And you say that this boy you met in the car brought the news to your cousin?"

It was the young girl who spoke. She had been

listening intently to Eric's narrative, and was apparently absorbingly interested in the affair.

"Yes," replied our hero. "The one who sat next to me and put my satchel up in the rack. Then it fell down and made the cat jump. Do you remember him, and do you know who he was? If I could find him, I might be able to prove something."

"Yes, I remember him," answered the girl. "But I don't know him. He told your cousin about your—about what he thought had happened to you that same night before he went home?"

"Yes, he was here in Cedarbrook at eight o'clock."

"Then if you had come straight on here after the accident, instead of going home with me, this would not have happened," went on the young girl, in an agitated voice. "I have been the cause of all your misfortune. You must see that it is so, and——"

"Please do not distress yourself about it," returned Eric, hastily. "I am sure that it will all come right in a short time. Perhaps I may need your assistance in proving that I am myself and not somebody else," he added, with a smile.

By this time the three had reached the Bluff House, having followed the road, with which the Applebys seemed to be very familiar. They had come to Cedarbrook, it appeared, to call on some friends at the hotel.

When they reached the piazza, and the young girl ran forward to greet a lady who had evidently been waiting for her, Eric took off his hat preparatory to excusing himself.

"One moment, Mr., or shall I say Eric, my young friend Eric," began the old gentleman, plucking him by the sleeve and motioning toward two vacant chairs in a retired corner of the porch. "I should like to make you a—well, a proposition, if you will grant me a short interview."

"Certainly," and wondering what was coming next, Eric took a seat beside the father of the girl he had rescued.

"Now you will pardon me, I am sure," went on Mr. Appleby, who was evidently trying to find an easy way of asking an awkward question; "but am I to understand, that is, I suppose you are not so squarely seated in the lap of luxury as you will be when you get your rights?"

"I can frankly say that I am not. Indeed, as I am a stranger in the country, and as all my friends are at present out of reach, I shall——"

"Excellent, excellent," excitedly broke in Mr. Appleby; then restraining himself, he added, apologetically: "I mean I am sorry for it, but that makes it easy for me to offer you an engagement with our combination till such time as you can—can, in short, not only sit in luxury's lap, but roll all about in it."

"You are very kind, Mr. Appleby," returned Eric. "I must work at something to support myself while I am proving my identity. I intended leaving here in the morning to seek a position of some sort in the city."

"Then I will meet you on the train and you can come with us at once to the theater."

"Why, what can I do in a theater?" exclaimed Eric, who had not quite taken in the full meaning of the word "combination." "I might sell tickets or show the people to their seats, perhaps."

"Oh, no, I do not want you for that, but to appear on the stage with my daughter in 'Fairfield Farm.'"

"But I have never acted in my life," objected Eric. "Indeed, I have only seen about half a dozen plays."

"That doesn't matter. You won't have any bad habits to unlearn."

"Then all my wardrobe is in Mr. Tilbert's possession, except the suit I have on."

"Medford's can be made to fit you with very little altering, and I am sure you can *look* the part to perfection. We will pay you the salary we would have given him, ten dollars a week."

"But what would I have to do?" asked Eric, his breath almost taken away at the idea of his turning actor.

"Oh, just walk about with a tennis racquet in your hand, make a few speeches to Louise, and then save her life, or rather a dummy's, when the house catches fire."

"Save a dummy's life!"

"I'll explain. You see, I couldn't think of exposing my dear child to any risk, so as she only has to scream for help when the fire breaks out, she can do that from the wings. Then we have a large figure dressed up to look like her, you run into the house, up the stairs, then pick this figure up and leap out of the window with it on to a hay mow. That's what disabled poor Medford and made it possible for me to offer you this opening. At a dress rehearsal the other morning, he missed his aim and landed partly on the stage, breaking his leg."

"And I am expected to run the risk of doing the same thing for ten dollars a week," reflected Eric. "But beggars mustn't be choosers, and I ought to be glad to take up with anything that promises to put bread and butter in my mouth while I am proving my right to be able to eat it."

"Don't you perceive the poetical appropriateness of your assuming the part?" Mr. Appleby went on to observe; "you, who so gallantly risked your life to deliver my daughter from the burning car, now to appear on the boards with her, and in a play that calls upon you to perform a similar service! Why, it is an amazing stroke of luck that we can secure you."

Here the old gentleman came to a sudden pause. He had evidently just realized that, however advantageous the circumstances might appear in the eyes of a manager desirous of obtaining all the free advertising possible for a new venture, it was not exactly policy to so forcibly impress upon the mind of a ten dollar member of the company that he was possessed of such drawing powers.

As for Eric, he would have been dull witted indeed if he had not been able to perceive that Mr. Alonzo Appleby, in offering him the position of the unlucky Medford, was by no means the disinterested philanthropist he might desire to appear to be. However, just at this stage of his fortunes, our hero could not well afford to be captious, so the bargain was closed.

"I will meet you on the train that leaves here at 8:17 in the morning," said Mr. Appleby, who lost much of his pompous style of speaking whenever he talked business. "I will look for you in the forward car."

"Well, what would Fred say to this fresh turn in my fortunes?" mused Eric, as, weary alike in body and mind, he sought his room when the old gentleman had left him. But he didn't stay awake long to ponder the problem. Within a quarter of an hour he was sleeping a troubled sleep, beset by dreams of overturning cars, threatening tramps, and a troop of toads playing leapfrog in a theater.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNREHEARSED SCENE.

My readers have doubtless at some time or other in their lives gone to bed at night fully resolved to pursue a certain line of action, and waked up next morning to wonder how they could ever have come to such a determination.

This was the case with Eric. When the sunshine of another day flooded his room at the Bluff House and served to remind him of his promise to meet Mr. Alonzo Appleby on the 8:17 train, he was very much astonished on reviewing his own part in the matter.

"What was I thinking of?" he muttered, as he began to dress. "I've no business to do anything but establish my claim to be alive, and put a stop to the rascally scheme of that precious cousin of mine."

At this point, however, his thoughts took a different turn, suggested by an inspection of his collar.

"Um, well," he proceeded to reflect, "unless I am fully sure of getting myself acknowledged within twenty four hours, I don't know but what a ten dollar engagement will come in very handy in the way of providing me with some fresh linen and settling laundry bills."

Then, as he recollected the fact of his well stocked trunk being within half a mile of him at that very moment, he ground his teeth and inwardly vowed



MR. APPLEBY'S INTERVIEW WITH THE MANAGER.

to show no mercy to the thief who deprived him of it.

"Ah, Mr. John Tilbert," he murmured, "I'll have a nice array of charges to bring against you when my turn comes!"

On paying his bill after breakfast, Eric found himself left with just three dollars and fifty five cents.

"And thirty of that must be spent for my ticket," he said to himself, as he started off toward the station.

Twenty minutes later he was seated beside Mr. Alonzo Appleby, who assured him that he was looking splendidly, and would be sure to gain favor with Mr. Banner.

"Who is Mr. Banner?" asked Eric.

"The manager of the 'Fairfield Farm' combination," was the reply.

"Why, I thought you were the manager!" exclaimed Eric, in some surprise.

"So I am—of my daughter. It was under my direction that she achieved her reputation as a star last season. But I have great influence with Mr. Banner, and I am confident of my ability to make him see that you are much better suited to the character of Clarence Terrington than is Dan Medford."

"And who is Dan Medford?"

"Joe Medford's brother. Dan stepped up, expecting to get Joe's place when the poor fellow disabled himself the other day."

"But I don't want to have anybody put out of a situation on my account," said Eric, beginning to feel uneasy at the prospect before him.

"Tut, tut, my boy, make your mind peaceable on that score," responded Appleby. "Banner would only accept him for the want of something better. But here we are at the ferry."

On the boat, and during the ride up town to the

theater on the elevated railroad, Mr. Appleby explained to our hero more particularly what would be required of him in the character of Clarence Ter-rington.

It seemed that there were only a few lines to speak, and that the principal use of the part was to show the audience that a dude had some good points about him, after all. At least this was the moral element; but Eric comprehended plainly enough that the "leap for life" was the manager's strong point, and he began to fear that he was going to introduce himself into rather doubtful company.

"It's a shame the way this old man makes that poor young girl support him," he reflected, recalling what Mr. Appleby had said about "managing" his daughter.

But by this time they had reached the stage door of the theater, and Eric became so much interested in his surroundings that all else was forgotten.

What the exterior appearance of the theater itself was like he had no idea, as it fronted on the avenue, and the door opened on a side street, where bare footed children played in the gutters and shrill voiced hucksters were crying their wares.

Leading the way through a long, narrow passage, with wire caged candles jutting from the brickwork here and there. Mr. Appleby presently brought up in a place which Eric concluded must be that enchanted quarter known as "behind the scenes."

But where was the glare, the glitter, and the general fairy-like aspect supposed to predominate in this region? Bare brick walls, dust covered pieces of canvas, rickety stairways, and a general suggestion of Shantytown was the impression made upon Eric by his surroundings. He would not have known where he was had he not caught a glimpse through an opening in the scenes of the empty au-

ditorium, with its rows upon rows of seats draped in white linen, like so many ghosts come to see their brother play his role in "Hamlet."

In the middle of the stage a tall gaspipe springing from the footlights served to faintly light up the scene. Seated at a table, with writing materials before him, was a man in a plaid coat, with a high hat perched on a crop of the reddest hair Eric had ever beheld.

He was talking in a highly excited key to a young fellow of eighteen or thereabouts.

"That is Dan Medford," whispered Mr. Appleby. "I was in hopes we would get here ahead of him. He is trying to induce the manager to engage him in his brother's place. You wait here while I whisper to Mr. Banner that I have a better man for him."

Feeling somewhat uneasy at this summary fashion of obtaining the position, Eric sat down on a soap box, painted on one side to represent a footstool, and watched his patron advance towards the manager, hat in hand, and with a series of very obsequious bows.

"Well, Mr. Appleby, good morning, sir," he heard Mr. Banner interrupt himself to exclaim.

Thus encouraged, Mr. Appleby made a sudden dart forward, and with a profusion of "I beg your pardons" to the luckless Medford, intimated that he would like to speak a few words privately to the manager.

"Ah, yes," ejaculated the latter, turning to the applicant, "be so good as to 'retire up' for a moment or two. I will speak with you later."

Thereupon Dan Medford forced a smile and backed away until he brought up rather suddenly against a projecting strip of forest scenery. Then, perceiving Eric, he walked toward him, and, taking

a seat on the other end of the soap box, murmured something about a pleasant day.

"Yes, it is," replied our hero, thinking it hard lines that he should be forced into conversation with a man he was destined to supplant.

"I'm going to do my brother's act, you know," continued this frank individual, to Eric's increased disquietude. "At least, Mr. Banner has half promised me the place. And don't you think he ought to give it to me when Joe broke his leg trying to do his best for him?"

"I should think you would have a good claim," replied poor Eric, growing more and more uncomfortable. "But of course," he added, "I suppose it all depends on whether you would do—that is, whether you have had experience in acting or not."

"Well, I've been about a theater for six months. I was a scene shifter last year, and it oughtn't to take much on top of that to make a scene jumper of me, ought it?" And the fellow laughed at the joke he had made, then grew suddenly sober, as he caught the manager's eye fastened upon him.

He was an odd looking youth, so overgrown as to be gawky, and with a raspy voice that seemed to belong to neither boy nor man. He had, moreover, an injured expression of countenance, that seemed to bespeak a mournful experience of life.

Eric breathed a sigh of relief when Mr. Banner called out "Medford, now then;" but alas, his rejoicing was premature.

No sooner had the manager exchanged a few words with him, than, pointing toward our hero, Medford cried out: "And you've given the place to that fellow?"

"I didn't say so, did I?" returned Mr. Banner. "I simply told you that I did not think you were competent to fill your brother's role."

Mr. Appleby was observed to run his fingers through his hair and look uncomfortable, while Eric began involuntarily to search the boards for a trap door. Meanwhile Medford proceeded to bemoan his fate till our hero could stand it no longer.

Rising from the soap box, he addressed himself to Mr. Appleby.

"I do not wish to take this young man's place," he said. "I can find something else to do till I settle matters in Cedarbrook."

"But I wish you to take it, and so does Mr. Banner. We are sure you are just the person for us, and we cannot think of letting you off. Besides, it is very improbable that Mr. Banner would have engaged this Medford fellow in any case."

"Ah, it is true, then, you have got the place," cried the ex scene shifter, suddenly coming up in front of the two and fairly shaking his fist in Eric's face.

Mr. Banner stepped forward to interfere, but the disappointed youth wheeled around like a whirlwind and cried out:

"This is unjust, Mr. Banner, and you know it. You as much as promised me the place, and there is poor Joe lying on his back at home, and nobody to earn anything but me. But I will have my revenge, and you, young man"—with another glare at our hero—"will be the one to help me to it."

So saying, the wrathful Dan left the stage in four dramatic strides, the last of which was somewhat marred by reason of his tripping over the soap box footstool.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST REHEARSAL.

"SEE that that low ruffian leaves the building, will you, Mr. Appleby?" said the manager, majestically.

"But I would rather not accept the position under these circumstances," interposed Eric. "Not that I am afraid of the 'revenge' that may be taken on me, but as long as these Medfords need the money so badly——"

"I will make that all right," interrupted Mr. Banner, with a lordly wave of his hand. "Mr. Appleby informs me that you are at present unsettled, and I also happen to know that these Medfords take gentlemen to lodge with them. As you have manifested such an interest in the family, I am sure it would meet the wishes of all parties concerned for you to board there during your engagement with us. I will get the address for you, and you can go down there at lunch time and bring the costume for your part back with you. Meantime I will turn you over to Mr. Cringleman, my stage manager, who will coach you in your role."

So saying, and without giving Eric an opportunity to express an opinion in regard to the summary manner in which he was being disposed of, Mr. Banner nodded his head toward a short, smooth faced man, in his shirt sleeves, who had just made his appearance, and walked off with Mr. Appleby.

"Why should these people be so anxious to get me to act for them?" Eric asked himself wonderingly.

He was destined to find out in the course of a very few hours.

Meanwhile he was not allowed much time to bother his head as to whys and wherefores. Mr. Cringleman, who was a nervous, energetic individual, introduced himself with very little ceremony.

"I suppose you're to take Medford's place," he began. "You've got to be lively about it so as to be up in your part by tonight."

"By tonight?" echoed our hero. "Why, when is the first performance of——"

"Tonight; I just told you. If you keep on you can take the part of the dummy."

At this a group of sallow faced girls in gaudy straw hats and dowdy calico gowns, who had followed the stage manager in from the wings, giggled unrestrainedly, and Eric was seized with a strong desire to fling the roll of paper he had been given on the stage, and walk out of the building with his head in the air.

But a recollection of the ridiculous figure Dan Medford had cut stumbling over the soap box in making *his* angry exit, checked the impulse.

"I'd better make the best of things, now I'm in for them," he resolved; and then, in obedience to a suggestion from Mr. Cringleman that he should retire to some quiet spot to study his part, he walked to the edge of the stage, let himself down into the orchestra, and clambered over the railing into the deserted auditorium. Then, making his way to the lobby, he ascended the stairs to the balcony, where he settled himself in a seat just beneath a window, which would afford him air and light.

"Appleby never told me I would be expected to appear in public tonight," he said to himself, as he unrolled the parchment, which was written in a very legible hand, and comprised eight pages.

Eric was blessed with a good memory and a generous supply of common sense. The former enabled him to master his lines very rapidly, while the latter enlightened him as to what was meant by the apparently meaningless group of three words that occurred more or less often on every page.

He rightly decided that these must be his "cues," i. e., the last words spoken by some one of the characters just before it was his turn to take part.

Endeavoring to banish all thoughts of the Tilberts and Cedarbrook from his mind for the time being, Eric covered his ears with his hands to exclude the uproar of the rehearsal that was now in progress on the stage, and applied himself vigorously to his task.

It was much easier than writing Latin verses, which latter had cost him many a headache at Eton, and in the course of a couple of hours he was able to repeat the whole eight pages without once referring to the text.

Returning to the stage, which was now filled with people, he announced to Mr. Cringleman that he was ready for the next step.

"Lucky you are," grunted that gentleman, "for here's Miss Appleby, who mustn't be kept waiting. Now then, pick up that hammer—the tennis racquet's in the property room—and come sauntering in from the left wing. What can you whistle best?"

"'Three Little Maids,' from the 'Mikado,' answered Eric, after a second's hesitation.

"That'll do. Whistle that as you come on. You might be tossing the racquet carelessly from hand to hand, too. Come across to the porch here, and

then take off your hat to Miss Appleby, who will be sitting there. Then you'll get your cue from her. Now let's see what you'll make of it."

Eric was strongly of the opinion that he was going to make a fool of himself. Indeed, so ridiculous did the whole thing seem to him that he was obliged to exert all his will power to restrain a tendency to laugh, which would of course be fatal to the success of the whistle, to say nothing of his forthcoming debut.

"I'll just think what a mean rascal my cousin John Tilbert is," he said to himself. "That ought to keep me sober enough."

And it did, so much so that when he emerged from the wings, Mr. Cringleman called out sharply: "Look happy, not as if you were walking in procession at your own funeral."

This was discouraging, to say the least, and the "Three Little Maids" was very near coming to grief. But just then Louise Appleby encouraged him by a look, and Eric proceeded with his embarrassing task, for a goodly number of the out of school maidens in straw hats and calico frocks were congregated at one side of the stage watching his performance with the closest attention.

He had got half way to the porch of the farmhouse when his equanimity was again disturbed by a sharp command from Mr. Cringleman.

"Too much jerk to your walk. Go back and start over again, and don't stiffen your knees as if you were bracing yourself against an earthquake."

A chorus of titters came from the girls, but they were at once hushed into silence by a fierce "Sish" from the stage manager, who folded his arms and leaned back against the proscenium in a critical attitude, while Eric started on a repetition of his grand *entree*.

"I believe it would be ten times easier to do the part of a knight, or a brigand, or some other chap of the last century," he said to himself. "As soon as a fellow gets on the stage he seems to want to be what he isn't."

However, by concentrating his thoughts on Percy Tilbert, and imagining that he was on his way to fulfill an appointment to play tennis with that engaging youngster, Eric contrived to cross the stage and reach the porch of the canvas farmhouse in passably natural fashion.

Miss Appleby gave him the expected cue, and he got through with his answers with comparative success. He had only to be reminded twice by the watchful stage manager to "Speak louder, so the back seats can hear you."

His exit at the close of the short scene being "through farmhouse door," with the closing words of his last speech he pushed open the latter, and stepped—off into space.

It seemed that, as it was only a rehearsal, the slope had not been backed against the scene, so that Eric ended his first appearance on any stage with rather an inglorious tumble.

But it was only a distance of three feet, and, quickly picking himself up, he hurried around to the front, to receive censure or congratulations, as the case might be.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE MEDFORDS'.

"You did pretty well for a first try," was Mr. Cringleman's rather noncommittal comment, when Eric emerged from the wings, dusting his trousers with his handkerchief. "But what did you want to walk out of that door for? I called to you, but it was too late."

"Good morning, Mr. Dane," said Miss Appleby, who now came up, extending her hand. "Allow me to congratulate you on your success."

"What, as a tumbler?" laughed our hero. Then he added: "But that ought to put me in trim for my famous leap to the haymow. By the way, when am I to go over that?"

"This afternoon, at three o'clock," replied Mr. Cringleman. "By that time they'll have the dummy ready, and everything fixed for you. Now we take a recess for lunch."

This reminded Eric of the Medfords.

"If I don't like the place, I won't stay—that's all about it," he said to himself. "I'll make it up to them in some way when I come into my rights."

While he stood chatting with Miss Louise about the play, her father appeared and handed him a slip of paper, on which was written the Medfords' address, together with an order from Mr. Banner for Joe Medford to deliver to bearer the costume for Clarence Terrington.

"You had better go down there right away," advised Mr. Appleby, "if you want to be in time for dinner."

"How far is it, and which is the quickest way to get there?" inquired Eric.

Mr. Appleby gave him the necessary directions, and in the course of twenty minutes Eric found himself in front of the Medford residence.

The house was a two story one, built of wood, and standing back from the street at a distance of almost a quarter of a block. It was approached by a garden, now overrun with vines and weeds.

The tall brick buildings hemmed it in on either side, while across the front the cars of the elevated railroad rushed and roared all day and night.

The house itself was evidently a relic of New York's early days, when perhaps it had been the country seat of some Knickerbocker nabob. But whatever splendor it had once possessed was now departed. Decay was everywhere visible, and, as Eric ascended the steps to the front door, his foot caught in a hole, and he came near repeating the undignified tumble of the rehearsal.

"It's a wonder to me," he muttered, "that Joe Medford didn't break his leg here two or three times over before he ever heard of the haymow feat."

His knock on the weather beaten door was answered by an old lady who had evidently been standing over the stove, for her face was as red as fire, and in one hand she held a saucepan of boiled potatoes.

"Land o' Goshen!" she exclaimed, almost dropping the saucepan in her surprise. "I thought it was Sister Trix. But come right in, I'll show you your room soon's as I set these praties down."

"Why, they must have been expecting me," thought Eric. "Perhaps Mr. Banner sent word

that I was coming. They don't seem to bear any ill will on account of my taking Dan's place. S'pose I might as well make up my mind to stay for a few days, any way. The place seems clean enough, if it is on the high road to rotting away."

But now the brisk old lady was back again, and beckoning him to follow her up the uncarpeted stairs. At the top they passed a room through the half open door of which Eric caught a glimpse of a man lying in bed.

"That's poor Joe, I suppose," he told himself.

"But where are your things?" exclaimed the old lady the next minute, as she flung open the shutters of a good sized apartment with two windows, affording a view of the weeds and vines already mentioned; also a lengthy patent medicine advertisement on the brick wall of the adjoining building.

"My things?" exclaimed Eric, as though he did not comprehend. Then, thinking it needless to go into details at present, he simply said they were all right, and asked in his turn what the price of the room was.

"Five dollars a week," was the reply, and then the old lady, announcing that he could come down to dinner right away, hurried off to dish it up.

"I should think that was cheap enough," mused Eric, when he was left alone. "I'll have half my salary left to replenish my wardrobe. But I'm going to start in slow on that, because before I need another suit of clothes I hope I'll have got the better of that Tilbert rascal."

Having washed his face and hands and brushed his hair, he descended the stairs and was guided to the dining room by a strong odor of corned beef and cabbage which issued therefrom.

"Set right down, Mr. —," and a second old lady, who looked enough like the first one to be her twin

sister—which indeed she was—paused as she pulled out the chair nearest the door.

“My name is Dane,” said Eric, coming to her rescue.

“Dane, oh yes, I’ll try to remember it, but I’m a dreadful poor hand at names, any way. Seems to me as though I’d heard that name somewhere else. Sister Phœbe, the young man’s name is Dane. What have I heard about somebody of that name just lately?”

The old lady who had admitted Eric, and who now entered the room from the kitchen bearing a great dish of corn, assumed a grave look as she took her seat. Proceeding to cut the beef, she replied: “Why, it was what I was readin’ to you in the paper this mornin’ ’bout that dreadful railroad accident night afore last. Don’t you remember Dane was the name of the young man that had come clear from England to get a big fortune that had been left him, and how he was almost at his new home when he was killed, bein’ in that last car that was all burned to ashes?”

“Yes, yes, I remember now!” exclaimed the second old lady, adding: “His first name was Eric, too, same as Martha Lib’s little boy that she lost with the croup last winter. To be sure, to be sure.”

As may be imagined, Eric was anything but comfortable during this conversation, which was not only unpleasantly suggestive, but served to convince him that his cousin John was leaving no stone unturned to settle in the mind of the public the fact that Eric Dane was no longer living.

He was buried in these gloomy reflections when he suddenly became conscious that the first old lady was speaking to him.

“I beg pardon. What did you say?” he asked.

“I was sayin’ I couldn’t see how you ever got your

courage up to let go and drop when the time came."

Eric stared. "Drop when the time came?" What could the woman mean?

"I don't quite understand you," he said. Then suddenly recalling the haymow act and thinking that might be referred to, he added hastily: "Oh, it doesn't take much courage to do that; you are sure of landing in a soft place."

"Do tell. But then it must make you dizzy to be up so high. Thousands of feet, only think, Sister Trix, with only an umbrella to hold on to."

Thousands of feet? Only an umbrella? Were these good ladies a couple of harmless lunatics, or had Eric blundered into the wrong house? Still he seemed to have been expected.

The second old lady's next remark did not tend to make his mind feel any easier.

"I wonder why Dan don't come to his dinner. Off scouring the town to get a lot of his friends to help him hiss down that poor young fellow tonight, I s'pose. I tried to persuade him out of it, but he was that wild there was no holdin' him in. But here he comes now. Who's that he's got with him, though?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A RECOGNITION AND A DILEMMA.

"HERE's a pretty state of things," thought Eric, as old lady Number One bustled out to open the door for the yellow haired young man who had vowed vengeance on him at the theater.

"There's a mistake somewhere, for these old ladies can't know who I really am, or they wouldn't talk as they do."

But now his attention was attracted by high voices in the hallway.

"Come, do you say?" he heard Dan Medford exclaim. "Why here he is with me now. Mr. Boltboy, this is my Aunt Phœbe."

"But who is that young man in at the dinner table now?" the old lady wanted to know in a tone of anxiety.

Dan Medford glanced in at the doorway and then burst out with; "Great Scott, aunt, that is the fellow who took my place away from me and who——"

Dan made a rush forward, but both the old ladies flung themselves in front of him, crying out: "No, no, Daniel; not here, not here! Don't fight in the house."

"Let me go, let me go," shouted Dan, struggling to free himself, "I'm not going to fight. I only want to ask him what he's doing here."

"I'm boarding," replied Eric, rising in his place

with as much dignity as he could call up under the circumstances.

"Boarding?" repeated Dan, and he was evidently so amazed that for the moment he forgot that he was in a passion.

Eric took advantage of the lull and briefly explained matters.

"I don't expect to keep the place at the theater more than a week or two," he added. "So perhaps when I leave I can induce Mr. Banner to let you have it."

"Umph, no, thanks," muttered Dan, "I wouldn't take it now, any way. My friend Boltboy has made me his assistant."

But here old lady Number Two broke in with: "Oh, Daniel, we've given his room to this gentleman. I thought he was the parasol man!"

"Parachute, aunt," interrupted Dan, adding, in a whisper: "Why can't we keep 'em both? I'll see if Boltboy objects."

Boltboy didn't, in consideration of a dollar being taken off the price, whereupon the old ladies undertook to effect the same bargain with Eric.

But the latter was not so easily won over. He had no idea of sharing his room with a man about whom he knew absolutely nothing, and frankly said so.

"But we took you to be him, so I don't see how you can object," said old lady Number One ingeniously.

"Besides, it will be cheaper for you," added her sister.

"And he's a very famous person," went on the other.

"Goes up in a balloon and drops thousands of feet with only an umbrella to hold on by."

"No, sister, not an unbrella a parasol."

"Ladies you are both wrong," interposed Mr. Bolt-

boy himself, who with Dan entered the room at that moment. "I descend with the help of a parachute. My next exhibition will be given on Friday afternoon at Swingman Beach. Infringers of patents to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Where am I to sit?"

He added this last with such a funny change of voice that Eric was amused in spite of himself. Now that he had an opportunity of viewing his proposed room mate, he discovered him to be a short, thick set young fellow of twenty five, or thereabouts. He had very light blue eyes, extremely black hair, a dainty mustache, and the rosiest complexion our hero had ever seen on a man.

"I suppose I might as well stay," Eric reflected. "It'll only be for a week or two at the most, and I'll need every cent I can save to proceed against that precious cousin of mine."

It was now past two o'clock, and he was obliged to hurry through the remainder of the meal in order to be back at the theater in time for the final dress rehearsal.

Dan, who became quite friendly after a while, secured the clothes for him, and graciously promised to give up the idea of taking his revenge.

Once out of the house with his bundle, Eric muttered between his teeth. "And this is what I have come three thousand miles for! To be turned off my own property like a dog by my cousin; made a companion of by a tramp, and have to swallow patronage from a fellow like Dan Medford!"

But if our hero was a boy of high spirit, he was also possessed of strong repressing faculties, and an hour later he was putting all his energies into his work at the theater.

And hard work it was. Over and over again he was compelled to go through his part, jump and all,

until he felt that he could do all that was required of him with his eyes shut.

It was exciting, to be sure, to walk into a building from which perfectly harmless flames were shooting forth in appalling fury, pick up the dummy, stand with it for an instant in a dramatic attitude in a window and then, with a ringing cry, spring out into the air.

Of course the jump would be made to a quick curtain—that is, the close of an act, and only a small portion of the haymow would be visible to the audience, so that the effect of the leap would be thrilling in the extreme.

“You’re sure to get a call before the curtain, both of you,” said Mr. Banner, “so that you, Sterling” (Eric’s stage name), “must pick yourself up in short order and be ready to lead Miss Appleby out in front.”

It was six o’clock and after when the rehearsal was over, so that Eric had barely time to get his supper and don his costume before the performance began. However, as he did not appear until the second act, it was not absolutely necessary for him to be ready to respond to his call until nine o’clock. But he resolved to be as far ahead of time as possible, so as to give himself an opportunity to recover from a possible fit of stage fright.

Therefore, on returning to the Medfords’ he ate his supper at a rapid rate, calculated to add dyspepsia to his other trials, and discouraging as politely as he could all explanations and apologies from the two old ladies, he clapped on his hat again and was on his way back to the theater before it began to grow dark.

He was greatly excited, and, strange to say, forgot all about Cedarbrook and his interests there, and the manner in which he intended to set about further-

ing them on the morrow, when he would have the entire day to himself. His whole mind was concentrated on the problem of how he would feel when he should emerge from among the canvas trees forming the left wing, and in his white trousers, flaming red and yellow blazer, with cap to match, saunter out to be the cynosure of thousands of eyes, to say nothing of opera glasses.

Suddenly a newsboy rushed by with the cry, "*Mail and Express, Commercial, Evenin' Sun!*"

"Let's see what new evidence of my death Tilbert has discovered," said Eric to himself.

He bought a paper, and hurriedly ran his eye down the news columns. There was very little concerning the accident, and nothing at all relating to himself.

He was about to fold the paper up and put it into his pocket, to be read when he had more time, when he caught sight of a paragraph headed :

INTERESTING ITEM IN CONNECTION WITH THE PRODUCTION OF
"FAIRFIELD FARM."

A romantic interest attaches to the appearance of the young man who has been engaged under the stage name of Frank Sterling, to play the part of Clarence Terrington. He rescues the blind heroine from a burning building under the most exciting conditions, and it now transpires that he is the very same person who assisted Miss Appleby (who fills the *role* of this heroine) out of the burning car in which they were both passengers on the occasion of the terrible accident on the Mid Jersey Railroad, night before last. The management are certainly to be congratulated on securing the services of one who has had practical experience in the art of rescuing maidens from perilous situations, and Mr. Sterling's *debut* will be watched with interest.

"Well, I didn't think I was going to be made such a sensation of as all this," muttered Eric. "I see now why they were so ready to engage me. It's all an advertising scheme, and I s'pose I'll have more opera glasses to face than anybody else in the place."

This was not exactly an encouraging reflection to one who was already beginning to grow rather nervous, but when Eric found himself in the dressing

room, amid all the excitement and bustle that prevailed there, and heard the lively overture played by the orchestra, he became filled with a wild sort of enthusiasm that quite banished all sense of fear.

The play began, and, dressed ready for his entrance on the stage near the end of the second act, Eric watched its progress from the wings.

The curtain fell, the band played again, once more the action of the piece went on until finally our hero caught his cue. Nerving himself as if for battle, he walked forth, gayly whistling his "Mikado" air, gave one glance at the rows upon rows of spectators, and then every word of his part went out of his head. For in that one glance he had caught sight of the boy whose name began with McQuirl.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SLIP 'TWIXT CUP AND LIP.

ERIC's sensations, when he realized that he was as ignorant of the opening lines of his part as though he had never learned them, can be better imagined than described. Indeed, the anxiety engendered by this unlucky lapse of memory quite dwarfed, for the moment, the important possibilities presented to his mind by that glimpse of the fellow he had been so anxious to interview.

"He's sure to stay here for an hour longer at least," Eric told himself, "so why should I lose my head over the recognition?"

Meanwhile he paused neither in his saunter nor his whistle, and was by this time within a few feet of the farmhouse porch.

"If I had only forgotten the cue I am to get from Miss Appleby," he reflected, "I could hope that when I heard it I'd remember what my answer was."

All this of course passed through his mind in less than a minute, and at the end of that period he found himself doffing his cap to Miss Appleby, and listening to the cue she was giving him, without the ghost of an idea of what he was to say in reply.

He stood there, cap in hand, his back half turned to the audience, while the cold perspiration broke out on his forehead, and a trembling began to seize upon his limbs. Already in anticipation he could *hear* the awful silence that would follow the close of

the heroine's speech, and in imagination could see the wonder, and pity, too, perchance, depicted upon the faces of that vast assemblage.

Should he make a dash for the exit now, he asked himself, or stand there mute and motionless until the curtain was rung down on his disgrace?

But now Miss Louise ceased speaking, and—but what was this? Yes, Eric was actually replying, uttering the words of that part which a second before he had forgotten as completely as though it had never existed.

In five minutes it was all over, and he was behind the scenes, receiving the congratulations of Mr. Appleby, who patted him on the shoulder, and assured him that he couldn't have done it better.

"But I didn't think I was going to do it at all," Eric responded modestly. "I can't understand now how I got through, unless it was by a kind of mechanical memory of what came next;" and then he explained how he had seen in the audience the one person who could furnish him with the proof that was needed to put him into possession of his rights, and the consequences that had resulted from the circumstance.

"I must have a talk with him before he leaves the theater," he added. "Now, how shall I manage it? I can't go in front in this rig, and I've got to be on the stage so much from now on that I won't have time to change it. And if I let slip this chance of finding out where I can lay my finger on that chap when I want him, I—well, I deserve to lose my fortune, that's all."

"We'll send somebody out to see the young man for you and get him to come behind," said Mr. Appleby; "or I'll go myself if you point him out to me."

"How can I?" objected Eric. "We can't go on

the stage, and we can't see him from the wings, can we, without being seen ourselves?"

"The act will be over presently, and then you can come and point him out through the hole in the curtain."

With this Eric was forced to be content, although he was so impatient that he could not sit or stand still, but kept pacing back and forth with a look of anxious suspense on his young face that seemed widely out of keeping with his dress.

At last the curtain fell, and before the stage was cleared of those who had taken part in the final scene, Eric rushed out and applied his eye to the peep hole.

Yes, there sat the object of his search, attired in a black frock coat, with his hair plastered down over his ears, and a collar that evidently held his head as in a vise.

He seemed to be alone, as he was engaged in reading his programme.

"There he is, in the fifth row on the right, Mr. Appleby," cried Eric, excitedly, as his patron in the theatrical world took his turn at peeping. "The one with the terribly high collar on and his hair brushed very slick. Do you see him?"

"Oh, yes, most undoubtedly," was the prompt reply. "I'll go out and bring him around myself. Shall I give him your name?"

"Perhaps you'd better not," laughed Eric. "He might think it was a ghost, and decline to come."

"He may have recognized you already."

"I guess not, or he wouldn't be sitting there so calmly. Just tell him that somebody would like to speak to him for a moment behind the scenes."

"I'll wager there won't be any trouble getting him to come," quoth Mr. Appleby, as he marched off on his errand.

Eric would gladly have remained at the peep hole to watch the execution of it, but the scene shifters now required full possession of the stage to make the changes for the next act, and he adjourned to the wings and watched the putting together of the canvas building from which he was to make his sensational leap into the haymow.

"There won't be much glitter in stage life left for me after my experience here," he reflected, as his eye took in the cobwebbed corners, the dangling ropes, and the general "wrong side out" effect which all the surroundings bore stamped upon them.

"The audience get all the fun there is in it," he decided, with a vivid recollection of the wearisome grind he had been put through at the rehearsals.

To his impatient expectancy, it seemed as if Mr. Appleby never would come back; but at length, just after the curtain rose on the third act, he appeared—with the wrong boy!

But before Eric could explain the fact, the call boy ran up to remind him that he was needed on the stage, and he was obliged to hurry off.

"How stupid in Mr. Appleby," he complained to himself. "I told him what he looked like, but, after all, perhaps he isn't so much to blame, for this fellow has a high collar and slicked hair, only it's light. And I don't believe I thought to tell him the color, any way. Well, all I can do is to wait till I go off again."

But as his presence was required in groupings for almost the entire act, his patience was put to another severe test.

"What if that chap should take it into his head to go out, or change his seat?" he said to himself. "It may be days before I can get on his track again."

Eric's transformation into a lawn tennis dude had

not been accomplished without the use of paint, cosmetics, and the adjustment of a dainty false mustache, so there was not much hope of his being recognized by his late traveling companion, especially as the latter believed him dead.

He was thinking rather soberly on the exasperating fashion in which fortune was treating him, and idly toying with his racquet as he sat with the gay company looking on at a juggling entertainment given by the guests of "Fairfield Farm," when a shrill scream just behind him brought him back to present duties and dangers with a rush.

For the scream came from a girl in the company, and its dread burden was "Smoke." An instant later and the awful cry of "Fire" rang through the theater.

Instantly Mr. Banner was before the footlights, seeking to prevent a panic. His sharp tones and calm presence, coupled with the fact that as yet not a particle of flame was visible, tended to allay the alarm in a good degree. Still the audience could not be induced to remain.

The fire proceeded from the haystack, which had been placed in a position ready for Eric's leap. A rope among the flies had swung into a gas jet, and the burning portion had dropped to the hay just below.

The firemen who are always about a theater promptly extinguished the flames, but that one scream had settled the business of keeping the matter from the audience. The performance was perforce brought to a termination for lack of spectators, among the first to rush out being the boy whose name was McQuirl.

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERIOUS LOSS.

"GREAT CÆSAR, this is a pretty way to treat a fellow! Engage him for a week, and then set him adrift without a day's notice and with only a day's salary, and that not for any fault of his. Why, that Banner is a—well, he's keeping a sharp lookout for Number One, and I suppose I'll have to make the best of it. But I've had a lesson, any way, I ought to remember."

Such were our hero's reflections when he had read a note passed in to him under the door at the Medfords', the next morning, before he was dressed.

It was from Mr. Banner, and read as follows :

SQUARE THEATER, Thursday, midnight.

We have been notified to discontinue the use of the haymow act in our production of "Fairfield Farm," owing to the danger from fire. Hence it has been decided to cut out the character of Clarence Terrington; so your services will no longer be required. I enclose two dollars in payment of duties already performed. Yours truly,

WINTHROP BANNER.

Taking the bill from the envelope, Eric placed it on the bureau, and then proceeded to add to it the money from his various pockets, making the following mental commentary at the conclusion of the ceremony :

"Grand total, \$5.15 ; owing to the Medfords for a week's board (if I stay) \$4 ; amount left for purchasing fresh stock of collars, cuffs, and underclothing, \$1.15 ; present source of income, nix ; prospec-

tive fortune, something over a million ; and now the question is, how am I to bridge over the gap between expectation and realization ? ”

He sat down to study the problem, but the longer he thought about it, the deeper grew the conviction that all his energies ought to be concentrated on obtaining an interview with that fellow he had seen in the theater the previous evening. The exasperating fashion in which he had lost the opportunity afforded him still rankled in his mind.

In the confusion following the fire he had had no opportunity to obtain a report from Mr. Appleby ; indeed, had not seen him. Besides, as he had singled out the wrong person, it was not to be supposed that he would be able to provide our hero with any information that would be of use to him.

“ I ’ ll go back to Cedarbrook, in spite of Mr. Tilbert ’ s edict of banishment, ” Eric resolved. “ I ought never to have left it. Perhaps if I hadn ’ t I ’ d be having a good natured cousinly pillow fight with Percy and his brother at this very moment. ”

“ How did the play go last night ? ”

Eric started at the question. He had quite forgotten that he had a room mate. Coming home late from the theater, utterly worn out, he had gone to bed almost without noticing the young man who occupied the inside edge of it, and the receipt of the note from Mr. Banner had served to banish the recollection of his presence on this occasion.

“ Oh, good morning, Mr. Boltboy, ” said Eric, quickly snatching up his money in a roll and stuffing it all into one pocket. “ The play didn ’ t go at all — it stopped, ” he added, and then went on to explain the nature of the interruption.

“ You should be in my profession, ” responded the parachute dropper, sitting up in bed to gesticulate as he talked. “ There are no four walls to hamper

one with taking precautions lest they burn down. No ; the circumambient atmosphere is my stage, and the boundless expanse of country my auditorium."

"But how do you make it pay?" asked Eric. "You can't charge an admittance where there is no place to admit people to."

"True, and hence I am not dependent on gate money for my support ; for, although I live, so to speak, by air, I do not live on it. My frugal meals are supplied by a certain stipulated sum paid me by the railroad and steamboat companies that carry people to the points where I exhibit."

"That assures you a regular income in a very nice manner, then," said Eric.

"But the companies are so grasping, I don't mind confessing to you, that the percentage they allow me is but a miserable pittance, and they make it smaller with every exhibition."

"Why, how does that happen? I should think that as your fame spread you would be worth more."

"Ah, that is the sensible way to look at it. It is, in fact, the way I look at it myself. But how do these magnates of the transportation lines argue? This way: The people throng to see you take your thousand feet leap with the half defined expectation that you will kill yourself in making it. You do not sustain so much as a scratch, and what is the result? The crowd is disappointed of a hoped for sensation, and there are fewer to witness your next attempt. 'Hurt yourself, faint on the way down, or contrive to land in some perilous position,' say these unreasonable men, 'and your star of fortune will begin to ascend again.' Did you ever hear of a baser libel on the American public than that?"

Eric admitted that it presupposed a widespread love of the horrible, which it was to be hoped did not really exist.

"But young Medford and I," proceeded Mr. Bolt-boy, lowering his voice to the key in which important communications are made, "have formed a plan which we hope will give me my just dues."

"And what is that?" inquired Eric, who was becoming quite interested in this young man who talked like an old one.

"Why, we have procured a small tent which will be erected near the spot where I propose to alight, and into which I shall betake myself with all possible speed as soon as my feet touch the ground. Medford will then take his place at the door, and charge five cents to every person who wishes to enter and have a close view of the man who has dropped a thousand feet from the clouds. I will be rigged out in my costume, you know, and will be ready to show just how the parachute works, so we will give the people the worth of their nickel, don't you think so?"

Eric was spared the awkwardness of expressing his inward convictions on the subject by a rap at the door, which he hastened to answer.

It proved to be a summons from one of the old ladies to breakfast, at which meal our hero announced his intention of leaving New York that morning.

The old ladies—whom he now discovered to be the two maiden aunts of the Medford boys—expressed their regret at such an early departure, and fixed the price he was to pay for the night's lodging and three meals at seventy five cents.

Eric had risen from the table, and now put his hand in his coat pocket for his money.

There was nothing there. He tried another with the same result.

"Well, I know I'm not quite bankrupt," he remarked, with a laugh, "for only five minutes before

I came down I was counting how much I had up in my room."

"What did you do with it when you had finished?" asked Miss Phœbe.

"Put it in my inside coat pocket, but it isn't there now, nor in any of the others;" and a blank look spread itself over our hero's face as he finished exploring his clothes.

"Perhaps you dropped it on the floor," suggested Miss Trix.

"You had better go up and look," added her sister, and Eric was not slow to act upon the advice.

He found Mr. Boltboy adjusting his cravat with great pains before the looking glass.

"I've lost some money," began Eric, when the other interrupted him with: "Not in this room. Do not say that you left it here and that now it is gone."

"But I hope it isn't gone," went on Eric, too worried to wonder at the man's strange manner.

He fell on his hands and knees, and began carefully going over every foot of the carpet.

"I may be poor, but I am honest," went on Mr. Boltboy, adding in deep and solemn tones: "Will you permit me to help you in your search, or do you fear that I may pocket——"

"Mr. Boltboy," Eric looked up to reply with emphasis, "once for all I don't believe you stole my money, for the very good reason that I don't see how you could. I counted it myself this morning before I went down to breakfast, and then I remember distinctly putting it in my pocket. But it isn't there now, nor anywhere else that I can make out. It seems as if magic had a hand in it."

It certainly did, for not a trace of bills or silver was found in the room, outside of Mr. Boltboy's pocket book, which the over sensitive parachute man insisted should be examined.

It contained two fives, one fifty cent piece and two quarters, and when Eric stated that he had had only ones, a two, a dime and a nickel, Mr. Boltboy straightened himself up with the air of a vindicated man, put on his coat and went down to breakfast.

Eric remained in the room, put his head between his hands, and tried to think of a solution to the mystery.

CHAPTER XVI.

ERIC TURNS TRAMP.

"WELL, I've got to paddle my own canoe now, and in pretty rough waters, too. The money's gone, no matter how or when, and I've got to get along without it the best way I can."

This was the conclusion Eric arrived at after five minutes' hard thinking. Then getting up, he squared his shoulders, took off his watch and chain and went down stairs to settle matters with the old ladies.

"I'll leave my watch here as security," he said, when he had beckoned Miss Phœbe out of the dining room. "I hope to either send you the seventy five cents or bring it myself in a day or two, or perhaps by that time you may have found my money somewhere about the house. Good by. I am going out in the country to my relatives."

The door closed behind him, he strode rapidly through the shabby garden, and, reaching the street, faced toward the North River, and struck resolutely out in that direction. He had gone half a dozen blocks, and was within but a short distance of the wharves, when the recollection that he had not a cent of money with which to pay his ferriage to Jersey City caused him to come to a sudden standstill.

"And I can't get to Cedarbrook without crossing the river, that's one thing certain," he muttered.

He had started from the Medfords' with the intention of tramping the fifteen miles that lay between New York and the Tilbert residence. In England he had thought nothing of walking that distance with some one of his school chums, and with his independent spirit he had determined to get along without asking anybody for a direct loan just as long as he possibly could. But the river, which he had quite forgotten, now loomed up in front of him in the shape of a very formidable barrier.

"I wonder if I couldn't turn an honest penny—or rather three of them—by doing some work for somebody. I'll walk down the avenue toward the ferry and keep my eyes open for something, I don't care what it is. I may be poor, but I'm not proud, and if fortune is bent on buffeting me around like a football, I'm just going to show that I can take the hard knocks like a man."

He resumed his walk and kept a careful watch on both sides of the street for a chance to render some sort of service to anybody that he thought would be willing to pay for it.

But he saw nothing that looked promising until he came to the ferry itself.

Here he noticed a small boy carrying a large satchel for an old lady. He watched until the two reached the entrance, then saw the boy put down the satchel and the old lady put something into his hand.

"I'll try that," exclaimed Eric to himself, and turning up the side street, he stationed himself at the foot of the stairway that led to the elevated road.

There were two other boys waiting there, evidently with the same object in view as himself, for they eyed him with no kindly glances after he had made his first offer, to an old gentleman with an enormous black valise, who scowled at him fiercely with his refusal.

"I say, Kinney," he heard one of the boys say, "ketch on to the dude cuttin' into our trade. Let's bounce him."

Kinney, who was a most deplorable looking specimen of the genus gamin—with a crooked nose, only one good eye, and the vile stub of a cigar, picked up in the gutter, stuck between his lips—at once stepped toward Eric, and taking the stub from his mouth to expectorate, spoke straight to the point :

"Look a here, young feller," he said, "us chaps has got a corner on this 'ere stairway, an' we don't allow no interferin' wid our rights."

Eric made suitable apologies, and was about to depart to station himself elsewhere, when the young Arab, who was spoiling for a fight, struck out at him with feet and hands combined.

Although not by any means of a belligerent nature, Eric wheeled like a flash, seized Kinney's bullet head and tucked it under one arm, preparatory to administering a gentle tap or two with the other, when the urchin's comrade gallantly darted forward to the rescue.

"Let him go," he cried, flourishing his legs and arms about like a mad pin wheel.

"Go for him, Jim," roared Kinney, struggling to bite or kick his captor, who held him in such a way that all his attempts were rendered futile.

Thus adjured, Jim ceased his gyratory motions and made a flying dart toward our hero's head, doubtless with the intention of pulling his hair.

But Eric was too quick for him. Still retaining Kinney's head in a tight grip under his left arm, he threw out his right hand and caught Jim dexterously around the neck.

"Good for you! I guess you've taught them to know a gentleman when they see one."

Eric loosened his hold on the two boys and looked

up, to see a young man of about twenty four leaning over the railing of the elevated railroad stairway just above his head. A policeman appearing on the scene at the same moment, Kinney and Jim decided, on finding themselves free, to seek fresh fields of industry. So Eric was left master of the field.

"Can I carry your satchel for you, sir?" he asked, when the gentleman who had congratulated him from the stairway reached the sidewalk.

He was a handsome fellow, with a pair of gray eyes that twinkled with fun, and a general trimness of figure that took Eric's fancy at once. He was dressed in a tweed traveling suit, and in one hand carried a small satchel, while the other held a cane and a tennis racquet.

When Eric requested the privilege of carrying his baggage for him, the young man first stared, then whistled and finally handed over his satchel with the remark: "Was that the cause of the row? I saw the whole thing and admired your pluck."

"I was pretty mad," returned Eric, "and perhaps I was a little too rough on the youngsters. You see they were both a good deal smaller than I am."

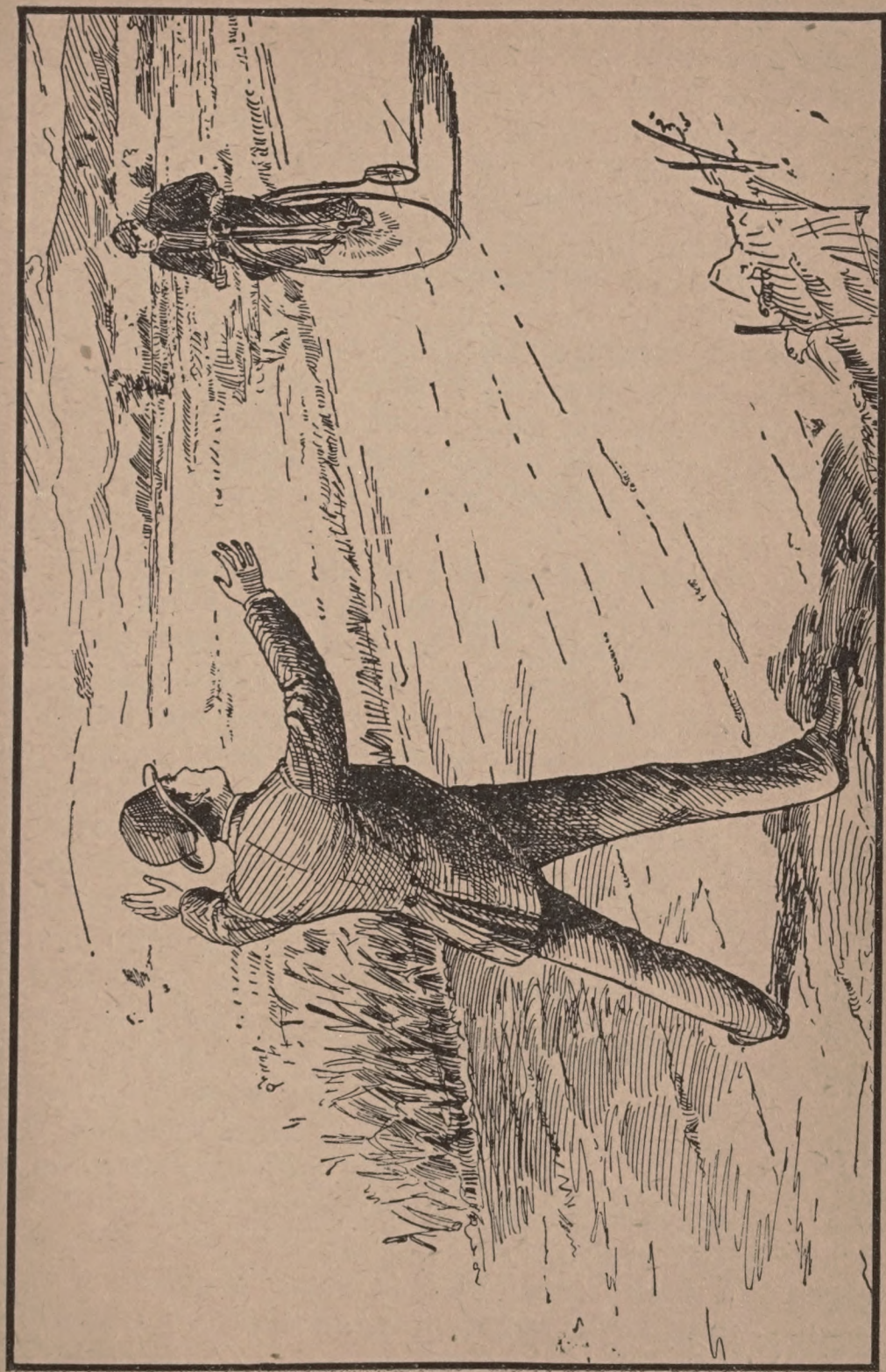
"I beg your pardon, but you don't look as if you were accustomed to carrying hand baggage for a living," went on the young man after a brief pause.

Eric colored slightly, then answered frankly: "I'm not, and I'm not doing it now for a living, but to earn three cents to pay for a ferry ticket. You see I want to get across the river, but haven't a cent to my name."

"Oh, you had your pocket picked?"

"No, not that exactly; but all the money I had disappeared in a most mysterious fashion this morning."

"Ah, I see. If you will permit me, I will present you with a ferry ticket and my best thanks for carrying my bag."



“STOP FOR A MINUTE !” SHOUTED ERIC.

Eric was quick to appreciate the delicacy of the other in seeking, by this means, to provide him with the means of crossing the ferry without actually making it apparent that he was paying for what might be considered a menial service.

"Thank you," he said, as the other passed him in as his friend. "I may as well hold on to this till we get across."

The two walked on the boat together and as they took places at the forward end and began conversing about objects of interest on the river, Eric could not help fancying how surprised his companion would be if he knew the full extent of his financial straits.

"I dare say he thinks I'm going to walk into my father's house over in Jersey and laugh over my adventure with the rest of the family," and in that supposition Eric was not far wrong.

When the boat reached the opposite shore, our hero announced that his way lay straight out through the gates of the ferry house.

"And I take the train—and my satchel," said the other, with a smile, and so they parted. Little did our hero imagine under what distressing circumstances they were next to meet.

Inquiring of a policeman, whom he met in the street, in which direction he should go to strike the road to Cedarbrook, he received instructions and set out at a brisk pace to follow them.

It was now after ten and the sun was beginning to grow uncomfortably warm.

"But never mind," said Eric to himself. "Perhaps this time tomorrow I'll be bowling along those fine Cedarbrook roads in a dogcart. And I'll enjoy my luxuries all the more then for being put through the mill now."

He had reached the open country, and was begin-

ning to debate within himself how he was to earn his dinner, when his gaze became fixed on the head of an approaching wheelman.

“If that fellow hasn’t got on my cricket cap, I’ll ——” then, as he remembered that he had stuffed that cap into the satchel he had had with him on the train at the time of the accident, and that possessing it he might be able to prove his identity to Mr. John Tilbert’s utter confusion and rout, realizing all this he threw up both hands excitedly and planted himself squarely in the path of the approaching bicyclist, crying out: “Stop there, will you? I want to speak to you!”

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.

“WHAT’S the matter with the fellow?”

This was what Eric asked himself as he stood in the middle of the road, signaling and calling to the approaching bicyclist.

The latter seemed to be much disturbed. He looked in a wild kind of way from left to right, even tried to turn his head and gaze behind him. In short, he appeared to be endeavoring by every possible means to avoid glancing at Eric.

By this time he was close enough for our hero to be confident that he had made no mistake about the cap. There were the initials of the cricket club embroidered on the band, and the two colors of which the cap itself was composed, were such as made it very unlikely that there could be another just like it.

“He acts as if he had stolen it and knew I was the owner,” thought Eric.

He planted himself fearlessly in the path of the swiftly advancing wheel, spreading arms and legs wide apart, and calling out in loud tones: “I say, stop, please, for a moment!”

If the other had been on horseback or in a carriage, he would, to judge from his manner, have had but small scruples about keeping straight on, thus compelling Eric to step aside at the last moment to avoid being run over. But a collision on a bicycle is as bad for the rider—if not worse—as for the

pedestrian, and after trying ineffectually to dodge past our hero, the wheelman was compelled to put on the brake very suddenly and dismount.

He was an ill favored youth, with small, beadlike eyes, which had a restless, hunted look in them, as though they were accustomed to being placed on guard. He was roughly dressed, his long trousers giving him a very unwheelmanlike appearance.

"I want to know where you got that cap you're wearing," answered Eric, laying a hand on the saddle of the bicycle, to prevent its rider from making off before he was through with him.

"Well, you're a pretty cool sort of chap, I must say. What business of yours is that? Take your hand off that saddle. I'm in a hurry."

"So am I—to have you tell me where you got that cap," returned Eric, bracing himself for an encounter of muscular forces. "I've lost a cap that I'd know among a thousand, and it's the very one you've got on your head."

All this time the other boy was glancing nervously behind him, and apparently paying but little attention to what Eric was saying after the first few words. Suddenly he snatched the cap from his head and flung it to one side of the road.

Naturally Eric started to pick it up, when instantly the wheelman sprang into the saddle and was off like the wind.

Too late our hero realized how foolish he had been. He had the cap, to be sure, but he would gladly have allowed its late wearer to keep it if he could by this means have induced him to explain where he had obtained it.

"It's out of the question to think of catching him now," he said to himself dispiritedly, as he stood watching the fast vanishing figure on the glittering wheels.

And now a sudden thought struck him.

"I believe that bicycle was stolen," he exclaimed. "It was a splendid one, the latest make. That must be the reason why he didn't want me to detain him."

At this moment Eric's attention was attracted in the opposite direction by the sound of rapid trotting on the road ahead of him. Dark clouds of dust were sent rolling up by a horse and buggy that were approaching at breakneck speed.

The driver was a young man of about twenty one, dressed very much in the fashion of Eric himself when he appeared in the character of Clarence Ter-rington. He wore a pair of eyeglasses, through which he was staring as hard as ever he could.

Catching sight of Eric he hauled his freckled white horse in with a succession of loud "whoas" and cried out :

"I say, did you see a chap on a bicycle come this way?"

"Yes, I did," answered our hero, promptly.

"Quick, what did he look like, and which way did he go?"

The young man leaned out of the buggy eagerly.

"He went straight down the road, and he was a stout, stocky chap, with reddish hair, and now he hasn't got any cap. I want to have an interview with him the worst way."

"Jump right in here with me then," broke in the other. "You can spot him for me if he tries to escape by hiding the machine somewhere."

Eric did not wait for a second invitation, and in three seconds he was being whirled swiftly back over the road he had just been, traveling on foot, with his Eton cricket cap lying in his lap.

"The rascal has stolen my machine," the young man explained. "Deliberately walked into my sister's grounds and took it from the hitching post,

where I left it standing while I went inside for a minute."

"Have you any idea who the fellow can be?" asked Eric.

"No. I came out and found my bicycle gone. Doctor Hornway happened to drive up the next minute. He said he'd seen a chap on a wheel coming in this direction. So while he went in to see Lucy I borrowed his trap and here I am."

"But do you think you can catch him?" inquired Eric, anxiously. "He was out of sight before you came up."

"I must catch him. The machine is worth a hundred and fifty dollars. But look there, isn't that the fellow now?" and the driver of the buggy pointed excitedly to the right across a stretch of marsh to a glittering object that was moving slowly over the rough ground in the direction of a river just visible in the distance.

"It looks very much like it," answered Eric. "It is certainly somebody dragging after him something that shines bright in the sun."

Without a word, the young man in glasses guided the white horse to one side of the road, turned the carriage round and then started off with all possible speed "on the back track."

"I'm going to try and head him off," he then explained to Eric. "I think he's a rough from Newark, and only started toward Jersey City to throw me off the scent."

"Are you going to drive to Newark, then?" asked Eric.

"Yes, if necessary, but I hope to catch him before we get there. There's a place a little way beyond this where wagons go down in the meadows to cart away the grass when it's been cut. I can drive across there, I think, without much trouble, and strike the

other turnpike a few minutes after that rascal does."

On they went, and presently the horse was turned aside and our hero was told to hold on tight as the buggy made a sharp descent.

By this time, the youth with the bicycle was almost across the marshes, and the chase seemed hopeless to Eric.

But his companion assured him that the other would feel so confident of their getting stuck in some bog, that he would grow reckless.

"And that is our only chance of catching him," he added.

The little white horse went flying along over the long grass, following a faintly marked out roadway that twisted and turned continually to avoid bogs and marshes.

But at last they drew near the turnpike in front of them. The fugitive, however, had reached it some time before and went flying triumphantly by on his stolen wheel.

Eric uttered an exclamation of disgust, but the other suddenly pointed toward the river, exclaiming excitedly : "They're going to open the draw. We've got him now !"

Sure enough, a schooner was rapidly approaching the bridge, and the attendant had already closed the gate, thus barring the passage for the cyclist.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DOUBLE MISS.

It really seemed as though fortune had decided at last to favor Eric. Springing from the buggy, he rushed up the bank and upon the bridge before the youth with the bicycle had a chance to make good his retreat.

The latter was caught in a regular *cul de sac*. Before him was the gap created by the open draw, while in the rear stood Eric ready to stop him by grasping his wheel should he attempt to dash past him on the bicycle.

And now the owner of the machine came running up, having hitched the horse to a big stone.

"Come, give yourself up, you unmitigated scoundrel!" he called out.

The scoundrel stood still in an attitude of hesitation for a moment or two. Eric was almost up to him. It seemed as if he could not escape unless he sprang into the river.

And this is what Eric thought he was going to do when he suddenly ran the bicycle to one side, and left it leaning against the railing, and then made a dash toward the open draw, through which a large schooner was just passing.

Eric started after him, but the next second he was horrified to see the fellow leap out into the air. There was no splash, however, and an instant later the reckless youth appeared on the after deck of the

schooner. He had taken the risk and jumped aboard as the vessel passed the end of the bridge.

"Set that fellow ashore!" shouted our hero, making a trumpet of his hands. "He's stolen a bicycle."

"There's yer old machine. What more do you want?" retorted the wily rascal.

"Oh, we might as well let him go," said the wheel's owner, coming up at this moment. "I've got my property back."

"But I haven't found out what I want to from him yet," objected Eric, gazing after the rapidly receding vessel as though he meditated plunging into the stream and swimming off in pursuit of it.

"I'm afraid it's too late now," said the other. "It looks as though the scamp had got on pretty friendly terms with the schooner's crew already. What concerns me principally is how I am going to get home with that horse and buggy and my machine. A bicycle isn't exactly the sort of vehicle to lend itself kindly to being towed behind. I am ever so much obliged to you for what you have already done for me, though."

"Don't mention it," replied Eric, who thought he saw what was coming. "I shall be very glad to do anything more for you in my power. If it had not been for my meeting you I would not have come so near getting hold of that fellow again."

"That is a funny way of looking at it," laughed the other, adding, "but if you wouldn't mind driving that horse back to my sister's for me, you will put me greatly in your debt."

"Well, I need to have somebody in debt to me the worst way," thought Eric, recollecting his empty pockets and the near approach of dinner time.

But of this he said nothing to his new acquaintance, but merely announced that he would drive the buggy back if the other would lead the way.

"But I can't ride over that stuff if I *can* drive over it," explained the wheelman. "There are too many holes and ditches cropping up unexpectedly. If you'll be good enough to drive back to where we left the other road, I'll ride around by this one and meet you. It's too steep to get the carriage up to this level. I'll start right off so as to be there as soon as you are. It's a long way round, but I can go faster, you know."

So saying, he mounted his wheel and went skimming off.

"He's a queer kind of customer," mused Eric, "trusting a fellow he's never seen before with a borrowed horse and buggy. Still, I don't see very well what else he could do. I wonder what he'd think if I asked him to give me my dinner as pay?"

Indeed as our hero drove along over the grassy road this problem of how he should provide himself with a midday repast began to grow more and more formidable.

Judging from the position of the sun, he decided that it must be close upon noon, and now that the novelty of finding himself penniless had worn off, Eric realized that he was in a serious case indeed.

"I might imitate that tramp and ask the fellow to invite me home to dinner with him," he suggested to himself, with a smile.

The smile, however, was a feeble one, and soon flickered out.

Up to the present Eric had tried to regard his misadventures merely as so many interesting episodes filling up the brief interval preceding his installation into his rights.

But would that interval be brief? Three days had already elapsed since John Tilbert had informed him that he was an impostor, and what had he done since then toward proving the contrary?

Very little, alas ; and just now it seemed as if he was drifting into a situation where he would be in a position to accomplish still less.

His mind filled with these sober thoughts and dismal forebodings, our hero mechanically guided the white horse back across the undulating meadows. In about ten minutes he had reached the point on the opposite side where they had left the other turnpike to pursue the bicycle thief.

He had driven slowly, so as to be sure of finding the young man with the eyeglasses there when he arrived. But he had not yet come up, nor was he in the vicinity.

"This is queer," thought Eric.

It certainly was, for he could see where the other road joined the one on which he was now waiting, and nowhere on either of them could he discern any object bearing the slightest resemblance to a bicycle.

Meanwhile the white horse was growing restive.

"Wants his dinner as much as I do mine," surmised Eric.

What should he do? He was ready to believe that if left to himself the horse would go straight to where his master lived. Still there was no certainty about it, and besides, was he not in honor bound to keep his appointment with the young man who had intrusted the buggy to his care?

"He may have taken a run down some side street to see a friend or make a purchase," reflected Eric. "I ought to wait here till he comes, especially as I haven't any pressing engagements to call me elsewhere."

So he drove to one side of the road under a tree, got out and began talking to the horse, feeding him now and then with tufts of grass.

There were not many houses about. The nearest was a country tavern, some hundred yards distant,

and presently Eric conceived the idea of driving there and inquiring whether a young man on a bicycle had been seen to pass lately.

So he got in the buggy again, and was soon engaged in conversation with the proprietor of the inn, a fat little man, with a bald head and a round face. He was standing out in front, near the horse block, walking up and down the road as if in search of guests.

"No, I can't say I have seen a bicycle go by within the last fifteen minutes. Were you expecting a friend?" he said.

"Well, I had an appointment to meet a wheelman just down the road here. But he doesn't seem to be even in sight. Whoa, there."

"Your horse seems to be restless. Your friend may be detained for some time. Would it be presuming in me to suggest to you let my man take your trap around to the stable and bait your horse, while you make yourself comfortable in the porch here? We should be very happy to have you take dinner yourself. I'll send one of the boys to watch for your friend."

The little landlord smiled hospitably, and thereby suggested a scheme to our hero.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE SILVER CUP.

"WILL you let me earn my dinner and that of my horse?" asked Eric, proceeding to put his idea into words as soon as the landlord paused.

The latter looked very much astonished. He evidently could not comprehend why a young man who could afford to drive about the country in a buggy should not have pocket money enough to pay the modest charges of an inn like the Silver Cup.

"Let you earn your dinner?" he repeated. "Is that what I understand you to say?"

"Yes," answered Eric, hurriedly. "I haven't a cent of money in my pockets—lost it all this morning. I'm willing to do anything from sweeping a room to feeding the horses."

"But I haven't any room that needs sweeping the chambermaid can't do, and my stableman always waters the horses."

Poor Eric! He was growing hungrier every minute, and his face began to look as gloomy as the great black cloud that had arisen in the west and was fast spreading itself all over the sky.

"If it wasn't for this horse and buggy," he said to himself, "I might strike for some farmhouse and offer to help them in with their hay before the rain comes."

The landlord, having discovered the financial status of the young gentleman in the buggy, betook

himself into the inn and sat down in the doorway, with his eye fixed on Eric as though he suspected he was planning to make off with the gaudy sign board that was swinging just above his head.

"If he'd given me a chance I'd have explained how I came to have a horse and carriage on my hands," reflected our hero, as he noticed the suspicious fashion in which he was being watched. "As it is, I believe the man thinks I have stolen the turnout."

At this moment a rockaway, drawn by a team of bays, and with two gentlemen on the front seat, came thundering down the road at a furious rate.

Suddenly one of the men pointed to Eric, said something to his companion, and the rockaway was pulled up alongside the white horse and buggy.

"Where is Mr. Weldon?" asked the man who had pointed to him, of Eric.

He had got out of the rockaway and walked up to the white horse, which he began to stroke and glance over in a critical way.

"Is Mr. Weldon the young man that wears eye glasses and had his bicycle stolen?" inquired Eric.

"Yes, yes. Is he in the hotel, and did he get his machine back?"

"Yes, he got his bicycle back, but he isn't in the hotel. I don't know where he is. He was——"

But at this point the other flew into a perfect passion and prevented him from explaining further.

"What are you doing with my horse and buggy?" he cried. "Get out of that carriage this instant, you young outlaw."

"I am not an outlaw, and how do I know that this horse and buggy belong to you?" retorted Eric, hastening to the defense of the property that had been left in his charge.

"You know it because I tell you it does," fairly shouted the old gentleman, for he was a man of

about sixty, placing a foot on the step and a hand on the dashboard preparatory to stepping in and taking possession.

But at that instant the storm that had been gathering for the past half hour burst with sudden fury. The rain came down in torrents, while a vivid flash of lightning shot across the heavens and was followed instantly by a thunder clap that fairly shook the earth.

The old gentleman backed away from the buggy and made a dash for the porch of the inn, whence he shouted to his friend in the rockaway to see that "that young rascal" took his horse and carriage around to the shed.

"Then bring him back to the hotel here," he added, "so we can find out what he has done with your brother in law."

When the two carriages reached the shed, where the stableman took charge of them, Eric turned to the gentleman who had been driving the rockaway and inquired: "Is the old man a doctor?"

"Yes," was the reply. "He is Doctor Hornway, and that horse and buggy really belong to him. My brother in law borrowed them to chase a thief who stole his bicycle. The doctor waited and waited at my house for him to bring it back, then got so impatient that I was obliged to bring him off to hunt for him. But where did you leave him? Stop, though, if it is a long story don't tell it till we get inside, or you'll have the old gentleman rushing out here to know what has become of you."

The stranger, who was a pleasant looking man of twenty five, then arranged with the stableman to care for all three of the horses, after which he and Eric, by dint of dashing from one place of shelter to another, managed to reach the inn without getting very wet.

They found the doctor engaged in earnest conversation with the landlord, and from the manner in which they both looked at him when he came in, Eric decided that he must have been the subject of their talk.

"Now, what have you done with young Mr. Weldon?" began the old gentleman, as soon as he caught sight of him.

"I expected to meet him here," replied our hero, trying to speak calmly, although the other's rough manner was extremely exasperating.

"You did, eh?" ejaculated the doctor, walking up to him and looking him closely in the eye. "How do you account for his not turning up, then?"

Eric bore the scrutiny without flinching, strong in the consciousness of innocence.

"I can't account for it," he replied. "But I'll tell you the whole story if you will listen to it."

The old gentleman grunted out an assent, and they all four sat down.

Eric began at the point where he had met the rowdy on the stolen bicycle, told of the recognition of a cap he had lost (which he held up for inspection), related how the rascal had slipped through his fingers, and then went on to recount what had taken place after young Weldon had made his appearance.

"If I had looked behind me while I was driving back across the meadows I might have seen just where he disappeared," he concluded.

"Umph, so that's your story, is it?" commented the doctor, gruffly. Then turning to his friend, he added: "What do you think of it, Brookfield?"

"It sounds pretty straight," was the latter's reply. "And this storm would account for Forrester's not turning up on time. You know you can't drive a bicycle through the mud."

"But you must remember that it has only been

raining since we arrived a few minutes ago, and the landlord here tells me that this fellow has been hanging about for over half an hour."

"You've got your horse and buggy back, though," returned Mr. Brookfield, "so I don't see what you have to find fault with."

This remark set the irascible doctor off into a fresh rage.

"Laurence Brookfield!" he exclaimed. "Do I deserve this at your hands, when I am doing all I can for your poor wife? I have told you of the delicate state of her nerves, and you certainly remember how anxious she was about Forrester. And it is for her sake I am going to examine this fellow very particularly."

"But still I see no cause to worry——" began Mr. Brookfield again, when the other sharply interrupted him with:

"You have not heard the landlord's story. I have, and I feel assured that there is something very strange about this affair."

Then, turning to Eric again, the old gentleman continued: "I suppose you will be willing to give prompt answers to some questions I am about to put to you. You must see for yourself that for me to have my carriage taken by one person and returned by another, who can give no satisfactory explanation as to what has become of the first named, is, to say the least, very extraordinary."

"I don't see why it should be," Eric ventured to interpose.

"Oh, of course you would say that," went on the other, complacently.

"But you asked me yourself for my opinion," and Eric gave a faint glimmer of a smile. He was weak with hunger, and what with this new complication began to feel utterly dispirited.

He had only one thing to console himself with for his detention by the old gentleman : it provided him with an excuse for remaining under cover during the storm, which still raged violently.

“What is your name and where are you from?” continued the old gentleman after an instant’s pause to recover his equanimity.

“My name is Eric Dane and I belong in Cedarbrook,” answered Eric, promptly.

The effect of this simple announcement was startling in the extreme.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

ERIC had no sooner announced his name than Doctor Hornway rushed across the room, seized him by the arm, and began to look steadily at his eyes.

"Hold up your head, my boy," he said in a voice strangely altered from its recent gruffness, although there was still discernible in its tones a strong undercurrent of suppressed excitement.

Our hero wonderingly obeyed, while the landlord and Mr. Brookfield looked on in undisguised astonishment.

"Strange," the old man muttered; "the visual organ seems steady and the general demeanor is quiet, too. An interesting case to study—very," and relaxing his hold on Eric's arm for an instant, the doctor rubbed his hands together in evident enjoyment over some anticipated pleasure.

But the landlord's curiosity could be held in leash no longer.

"Um, ahem!" he began; "do you think the young man is ill? I am sure I did not notice anything of the sort before you arrived. He may be merely pretending, you know——"

"Tut, man, no more of that," sharply interrupted the doctor. Then, glancing out of the window, and perceiving that the storm still raged furiously, he added: "Can you accommodate us with dinner? I

must wait here awhile longer to see if that Forrester does not turn up."

"Certainly, with pleasure. The table will be ready for you in five minutes," and the gratified host bustled off to the kitchen.

"Are you going to detain this young man, Doctor Hornway?" asked Mr. Brookfield.

"Detain him!" exclaimed the other. "Most certainly I am. Why, he is a--—"

The rest of the sentence was whispered in Mr. Brookfield's ear, so Eric could not catch it. But he saw the start that the younger man gave, and heard him say: "No, it can't be possible. I see no indications of anything of the sort."

"But didn't you just now hear him call himself Eric Dane?" broke out the old man. "And have you so soon forgotten that that was the name of the poor young fellow who was killed three days ago in that terrible railroad accident?"

"True; that is strange;" and Mr. Brookfield favored our hero with a mingled look of fear and pity that caused Eric more disquietude than all the doctor's wild invectives had done.

"But I really am Eric Dane," he exclaimed, starting up from his chair. "It's all a mistake. I was not killed in that accident. It is a plot to rob me of my inheritance on the part of my cousin John Tilbert at Cedarbrook."

"There, hear!" triumphantly ejaculated the doctor at this point. "He mentions Tilbert and Cedarbrook, so it cannot be a mere coincidence of name. No, I cannot be mistaken, I think. The lad who strayed away from Morris Meadows was under the delusion that he existed in the name of some one else, and always a person deceased."

What did it all mean? Eric was completely mystified. It was evident that neither of the gentlemen

placed any credence in his story, but why had the doctor's manner altered so suddenly? And who was this person who had strayed away from home, and with whom the old gentleman seemed determined to connect him?

"I give it up," he said to himself, "but as the old man doesn't look upon me as such a villainous character as he did half an hour ago, I suppose it can do no harm to remain passive and see the adventure through. Besides, I don't care to go away till I learn what has become of that young chap with the bicycle."

At that moment the landlord appeared to announce that dinner was ready.

"Come, Eric," said the doctor, rising and taking him by the hand—"as if I was a little boy," our hero muttered to himself.

"But why should he call me Eric," he further reflected, "if he believes me to be an impostor? And, greatest mystery of all, why should he invite me to dine with him?"

However, this last was a proceeding to which Eric was not at all inclined to object. Indeed, he was so hungry that he paid but little heed to his companions at table, and hence did not observe the frequency and attentiveness with which they looked at him.

"I think I've earned this meal honestly," he told himself, recalling to mind the services he had rendered young Weldon in the matter of recovering his bicycle.

As they rose from the table a carriage drove up to the door.

"Did you see anything of a young fellow waiting around here with a buggy and a speckled white horse?" Eric heard a familiar voice inquire of the landlord.

"It's Forrester!" exclaimed Doctor Hornway, and he hurried out to the porch, not forgetting, however, to take Eric's hand in that same peculiar fashion.

"I owe you a thousand apologies," exclaimed the young man with the glasses, hurrying forward as soon as he caught sight of our hero. "You see when I get going for a good spin over first class roads I usually forget everything else, and besides, I was eager to tell my sister how lucky I had been in getting my machine back. So I ran straight past the spot where I had agreed to wait for you, and never thought of you or the horse and buggy till my sister asked me if I didn't meet her husband and Doctor Hornway."

"And why didn't we meet you, I should like to know?" here interposed Mr. Brookfield.

"Because I turned off just above here to take a coast down Bobber's Hill," replied young Weldon, adding, as if inspired by a sudden recollection, "and that reminds me, there's Lucy out in the carriage now, Larry. She insisted on coming along for fear I'd forget to report if I found you."

"Well, now that everything has been straightened out," began Eric, "I'll go——"

"Yes, yes," quickly put in Doctor Hornway. "I'll take you right along with me. Landlord, please have my bill made out and send that buggy of mine around to the door."

"Are you going in the direction of Cedarbrook?" inquired our hero, in some surprise, for as yet he had not the faintest conception of the fate that was in store for him.

"Certainly I am, and will be glad to have your company."

Doctor Hornway spoke hurriedly as he dropped Eric's hand and turned to whisper a few words to young Weldon.

Eric noticed the start the latter gave, and then the odd look he cast toward himself. The next instant, with a hasty "Good by," he started toward the stables.

In a very few minutes the doctor's buggy was at the door, and presently Eric was seated beside him on his way toward Cedarbrook. At least, so he fondly imagined. During the drive the old gentleman by a few questions drew from our hero the story of his treatment at the hands of John Tilbert, although the only comments elicited were sundry ejaculations of surprise, incredulity or compassion. Then, "I am ever so much obliged to you for giving me such a good lift on my journey," said Eric, some twenty minutes later, as the white horse's head was turned in at the gateway of a brown cottage, set in the midst of a colony of towering poplars. "I will get out here," he added, as the doctor gave no sign of stopping.

"Oh, I want you to come in with me," was the reply; and then the old gentleman called out in ringing tones: "Jim, oh Jim!"

A tall, powerfully built negro came hurrying from the stables in answer to the summons. He took the horse by the bridle as the doctor brought him to a standstill in front of a white block at the side of the house.

"Now then," said the doctor, stepping out, and extending his hand to Eric.

"But this is surely not Cedarbrook," objected the latter.

"No, I cannot say that it is," was the reply. "This is where I live, and I want you to pay me a little visit."

"You are very kind," returned Eric, scarcely able to believe that he had heard aright. He added eagerly, as a sudden possibility struck him: "You do believe that I am Eric Dane, then?"

"We will talk of that later," responded the other evasively, as he led the way into the house.

Eric followed wonderingly, and presently found himself in a neatly furnished apartment on the second floor.

"Make yourself at home here," said the doctor, waving his hands from bed to wash bowl in hospitable fashion.

Then he hurried off, *locking the door behind him.*

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRUNK IN THE CLOSET.

"WELL, that's a nice way to treat a guest," said Eric to himself, going to the door and trying the knob to make sure he had heard aright.

There was no mistake about it. He was a prisoner. What could be the meaning of it all?

Eric dropped into a chair near the window, and tried to think of a solution to the problem. The only conclusion to which he could arrive was the one that Doctor Hornway must be in the employ of John Tilbert.

"But then that is so very unlikely," he reasoned. "It was by the merest chance I fell in with him. Still, it was just at the time I told my name that the old man's manner to me changed so suddenly."

At this moment he became conscious of voices in the next room.

"Eavesdropping, under the circumstances, is perfectly justifiable, I take it," he murmured, as he rose from his seat, tiptoed softly across the carpet, and placed his ear against the flowered wall paper.

"But, Paul," a woman's voice was saying, "is it safe to have such a person in the house? My nerves have been all of a tremble since you told me."

"Nonsense, Priscilla," he heard the doctor reply in a lowered tone, "he is perfectly harmless; besides, I have turned the key on him, and you need not see him at all. I shall take him his supper and

breakfast, and the first thing in the morning I'll drive him over to the asylum. It's too far to take Zenobia now, after the drive that Weldon gave her this morning. Besides, there are several patients I must see this afternoon, which reminds me that I must be off at once. Don't give yourself any uneasiness. He can't get out, and as an additional precaution I'll put Jim on his guard."

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Eric, under his breath. "They're taking me for an escaped lunatic!"

Everything was made clear to him now. The doctor's abrupt alteration of manner, his desire to look at his eyes, young Weldon's strange glance at him after that whispered communication at the Silver Cup, his present imprisonment!

All our hero's other trials and misfortunes seemed dwarfed to nothingness beside the fate that now hung over him.

"But they'll surely know at the asylum that I have never been there before," he reflected after an instant, with a ray of hope. The next moment he was plunged in gloom again by the recollection of Doctor Hornway's expressed wish to study his case.

"I believe he'd be only too glad to confine me at his own expense. Then the next thing Mr. John Tilbert will hear of the affair, which will just about finish all my chances of getting my rights. If I can only get away now, before the thing goes any further!"

Getting up from the sofa, he proceeded to make a thorough examination of the room. It was a good sized one, and was evidently the guest chamber. There were two windows and two doors in it. Of the latter, one was that which Eric knew was already fastened from the outside, while the other opened into a large closet used as a clothes press.

After ascertaining thus much, Eric turned his at-

tention to the windows. He had hoped to find a piazza roof running along beneath them, but there was a sheer descent to the ground fifteen feet below. This, being the driveway leading back to the stable, was covered with hard blue stone, not an inviting substance on which to risk a leap.

"Now is the time that haystack from the theater would come in handy," said Eric to himself, with a shadowy kind of smile.

This faded quickly, as he turned away and once more made a careful inspection of every object in the apartment.

"Let me see," he muttered, as he completed his round without finding a single peg on which to hang a hope, "it was nearly three o'clock when we got here. I suppose they have supper at six. I wonder if there's any hope of my persuading that doctor when he comes up to bring me mine that he's making a terrible blunder. But I suppose the more I say the worse muddle I'll make of it, as the very fact of my claiming to be Eric Dane is what put it into his head to capture me. No, my only chance is to get away from here tonight, make the best of my way to Cedarbrook, find out through Percy Tilbert or the coachman where that McQuirl fellow lives, and then push my claim right through."

This course mapped out in his mind, Eric became wildly impatient to put it into execution, and began to pace the floor like a caged wild animal.

Suddenly he stopped in the middle of the room, with the half suppressed exclamation: "I wonder if I can't do it!"

The next instant he was in the closet, excitedly running his eye over all that it contained. There were four or five dresses hanging from hooks along the side, a couple of large pasteboard boxes on one of the shelves at the further end, while the space

underneath was occupied by an enormous trunk of the Saratoga pattern.

The key was in the lock of the latter, and, with fingers fairly trembling from excitement, Eric dropped on his knees, turned back the hasp and threw up the lid.

At this point in his investigations he heard a step in the hall outside.

With two bounds he reached the room, and, picking up a book from the table in front of one of the windows, he dropped into a chair in the attitude of an absorbed reader.

But the footsteps died away further down the corridor, and in another minute Eric was back in the closet, continuing his examination of the trunk.

"Tray's in the lid. That suits me to a T," he murmured. "I needn't bother with that at all."

The body of the trunk was taken up with a man's heavy overcoat, a sealskin sacque, and two or three winter dresses, the whole smelling strongly of camphor.

"Better yet," exclaimed our hero, under his breath. "I think I can get along by taking only a few things out."

Stooping over, he gathered up the sealskin sacque and two of the dresses, and proceeded to hang them behind the other garments already depending from the hooks on the wall.

"There," he said, after he had adjusted the outer gowns to his satisfaction, "I don't believe anybody would suspect that anything had been changed here unless they came to examine very closely, and I mean to fix matters outside so that they won't think that's necessary. Perhaps they won't even open the closet door, but it's best to be on the safe side. Now to try the fit."

Stepping carefully into the trunk, Eric curled him-

self up into the space that he would be forced to occupy were the lid down.

The trunk, as has been said, was an unusually large one, and, being more than half empty, Eric found his quarters not so cramped as he had anticipated.

"My knife will keep the lid open wide enough to give me all the air I need," he told himself, as he sprang out to the floor again and returned to the outer room.

"Let me see," he mused. "I suppose the bedspread will be the proper thing to knot and hang out of the window here to 'give the semblance of flight,' as the novelists say. It's too soon to hang it out now, but I'll have to decide just how I'm going to rig it."

Ten minutes spent in testing the strength of various articles of furniture in the room convinced him that the leg of the bedstead was what he wanted.

"I can push it up close to the window, take out the mosquito bar, fasten the spread properly, and there'll be my escape all right. Only the spread won't reach very far out of the window. But that won't matter. They'll only wonder the more how I dared risk my neck on it. And besides, if it was any longer I might really be tempted to take my chances that way instead of in the trunk. I'll rest for an hour or so now, and then begin to put my scheme into operation."

CHAPTER XXII.

ERIC BETRAYS HIMSELF.

"PRISCILLA, oh, Priscilla, will you bring up that key? You'll find it on the left hand corner of the dining room mantel piece."

Eric started to his feet in a tremor of excitement. Having had but half a night's rest, and worn out with the adventures of the day, he had dropped asleep while lying on the lounge waiting for the return of the doctor.

It was the latter's voice in the hall calling to his wife that had fortunately awakened him just in the nick of time. Or was it too late?

Wildly, yet as quietly as possible, he tore the spread from the bed, knotted one end of it around the leg of the bedstead, and, hurriedly throwing aside the mosquito netting, flung the other end out of the window.

Half a minute later he was in the closet, and, just as he carefully lowered the lid of the trunk on himself, he heard the door of the room open and the doctor's voice exclaim: "I am sorry to have been obliged to leave you so long alone, but——"

Here there was an abrupt pause, and Eric heard the old gentleman hurry across the floor, presumably in the direction of the window.

The next instant again the cry, "Priscilla, oh, Priscilla," rang through the house. But the doctor, in his excitement, could not wait for his wife to ap-



ERIC PUTS HIS PLAN IN EXECUTION.

pear. Hastening to the head of the stairway, he called down :

"The fellow's gone! Dropped out of the window, made a rope of the spread! But come up here and I'll show you."

"If she doesn't suspect anything I'm all right," reflected Eric, trying to twist himself into a more comfortable position.

"I told you, Paul, I was nervous about your having that lunatic here," he heard Mrs. Hornway's voice saying presently. "And my best spread, too. But mercy on us, he never could have dropped all that distance and not killed himself!"

"Where is he, then, Priscilla? Look about you. He couldn't possibly get under the bed."

"Have you looked in the closet?" and Eric felt himself grow pale as he heard approaching footsteps.

"But what would be the use in his concealing himself in a place and leaving the door open?" (How thankful our hero was that he hadn't had time to close it.)

"Well, he isn't here, and I guess you must be right," was Mrs. Hornway's reply. "What are you going to do about it, Paul?"

"I s'pose I'll have to let him go," the old man responded regretfully. "But it's a great disappointment to me, Priscilla. I don't know when I have come across so interesting a case of mental aberration, and I had it in mind to request the authorities at the asylum to allow me to make a special study of it. I am afraid I made a mistake in locking the fellow in. But I knew you would be nervous otherwise, and I could not take him with me on my rounds very well. But who's that just drove up to the gate?"

An interval of silence, and then Eric was horror

stricken to hear Mrs. Hornway exclaim : "Why, it's Rob Manners! Don't you remember he wrote us that he was coming out to play in that tennis tournament at Orange, and, if the match lasted after six, he promised to have his friends drive him over and spend the night with us? You go down and receive him, while I spread this bed over. We'll put him right in here, but I wouldn't say anything about that young man. He might not sleep so well."

Here was a serious predicament indeed. The perspiration broke out in great beads on Eric's forehead, as he crouched there in his confined quarters, wondering how long he would be doomed to occupy them.

He had hoped that when the doctor discovered his supposed flight, the door would be left unlocked, thus giving him the opportunity to slip down stairs and out of the house after the family had retired for the night. But now that some one was to occupy the apartment, the chances of detection increased tenfold.

"I'm in for it, though," he told himself, "and I've got to go through with the business."

The minutes went slowly by, and then, "I wonder if it would be possible for me to slip out now?" he asked himself, as he heard Mrs. Hornway leave the room and go down stairs.

Cautiously he pushed up the trunk lid, rose from his cramped position, and stepped out on the floor of the closet. Oh, how pleasant it felt to stand erect! Eric threw back his shoulders, drew in several long breaths, and put his head out of the doorway to listen.

The house was small, and he heard quite distinctly the greetings on the front piazza. He gathered from them that the new arrival was a nephew of Mrs.

Hornway. But the voice was surely a familiar one, and belonged to some one whom he had seen very lately. The sounds were drawing nearer now. They were evidently all coming up stairs.

Hastily Eric returned to his refuge, and just as he placed his knife in position and drew down the trunk lid, he remembered where he had heard the new comer's voice before—from the steps of the elevated railroad station in New York that morning, and on the ferry boat afterward!

"If he should hear me," thought Eric, "he would take me for a burglar, if they haven't told him about the scrape, and for a madman if they have. I've one chance left, though. He's got to go down to supper, and if I can find out where the dining room is, so as to avoid it, I may be able to get off before he comes up again."

This plan really seemed to be feasible, and Eric began to breathe more freely—figuratively speaking; as a matter of fact, he was almost suffocated, for his knife had slipped, allowing the trunk lid to come all the way down.

He soon succeeded in raising it, however, after undergoing a horrible fear that it might be provided with a spring lock.

He now heard Mr. Manners moving about in the room, where he had evidently been left alone to prepare for tea.

Presently he began to whistle a lively air, and as Eric listened he could not help contrasting his present lot with the future he had pictured to himself when crossing on the steamer.

"I ought to be whistling over my toilet, too, this very minute, at Cedarbrook," he muttered to himself, bitterly.

Then, his innate manliness asserting itself, he set his lips together firmly and resolved to bear up

bravely, "for it might be worse," he reflected sensibly. "I might be a poor beggar in exactly the same box I am in at present, but without the shadow of a prospect of better days ahead of me."

Cheered by thus dwelling on the bright side of his fortunes, Eric seemed to find the air fresher and his quarters not quite so cramped, and he was enabled to wait more patiently for the ringing of the tea bell.

"One would think I was hungry," he even went so far as to laugh to himself, "and expected to go to the table with the rest of the family."

Ker—chee !

Eric's heart sank down to below zero, for it was he who had sneezed.

Had Manners heard him ? With strained ears he listened for some sound that should tell him whether or not he had betrayed his presence.

Yes, some one was hurrying across the floor, and the next instant Eric knew that Robert Manners was in the closet. He could almost imagine the expression of bewilderment that must rest on the young man's features.

"I thought sure I heard some one sneeze in here. It must must have been in the next room, though."

Ker—chee !

Eric had tried his best to stifle the sound, but vainly.

"By George !" exclaimed Manners, "there's somebody in the trunk !"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FINDING FRIENDS.

"WHY, if it isn't the fellow that carried my bag! What in the name of all that is extraordinary are you doing here?"

This was Mr. Manners's exclamation when he had flung up the lid of the trunk and beheld Eric crouching inside.

Strong in the consciousness of the purity of his motives, our hero rose to his full height, and confronting his discoverer, looked straight in his eyes as he replied :

"I am here because Doctor Hornway unlawfully made me a prisoner in this room, and I took this method of making my escape."

"But how on earth did you expect to escape by doubling yourself up in that trunk? Were you relying on somebody's coming along to carry it downstairs? But even that isn't so mysterious as the fact that my Uncle Paul has made you a prisoner. What have you done? Why didn't he hand you over to the authorities? Excuse me, but you must acknowledge that the affair has a very suspicious look."

"I know it has, but I—" before Eric could proceed further Mrs. Hornway's voice was heard in the hall.

"Robert," she was calling, "who are you talking to?"

"Come in, Aunt Priscilla," replied Mr. Manners, hurrying out to open the door for her.

Eric followed him, resolved to show that he was not afraid of an investigation, but Mrs. Hornway no sooner caught sight of him than she uttered an ear piercing scream, and would have fallen to the floor had not her nephew hastened to her assistance.

"Why—where was he?" she gasped out, looking at Eric as though he was an ogre with three heads.

"Oh, you mean this young man," said Manners, as he conducted his aunt to the sofa. "I found him in the trunk in the closet, and he was about explaining to me how he got there when you came in."

"In the trunk!" echoed Mrs. Hornway, in a tone of horror, appearing for the moment to forget her fears. "On top of my sealskin sacque and those winter dresses!"

"I assure you, Mrs. Hornway," interposed Eric, stepping forward, "that nothing is damaged in the least. I took out the sacque and two or three of the dresses, and was very careful with the others."

"Why you appear to be all right," exclaimed the doctor's wife, after regarding him attentively for a second or two. Then, turning to her nephew, she added: "I have always thought Paul carried his hobbies too far, and I think he has done so now in the case of this young man. He doesn't seem to be any more of a lunatic than I am."

"A lunatic!" repeated Manners in astonishment.

"Yes," said Eric, with a smile, "that explains my being locked up. Doctor Hornway, whom I fell in with by accident not long after I left you this morning, Mr. Manners——"

"My lands, Robert," here broke in Mrs. Hornway. "Have you met this poor, persecuted boy before?"

"I have, so you can imagine my amazement when I discovered him shut up in the trunk just now," answered Manners, adding: "But how came Uncle Paul to doubt his sanity?"

"Simply because I stated my name, Eric Dane, the fellow who was reported in the papers as having been killed in that terrible accident on the Mid Jersey Road the other day. As it happens, I escaped, but as nobody will believe it, I sometimes feel as if—but no. I won't say that. If I have patience I am sure to come into my rights in the end," and our hero spoke with a genuine earnestness that carried conviction with it.

"You are heir, then, to a large property in Cedarbrook?" said young Manners, interrogatively.

"Yes, of which my cousin, Mr. John Tilbert, hopes to deprive me, and retain it for himself."

"Oho, so the wind sets from that quarter, does it?" exclaimed the young man.

Eric began to congratulate himself that he had at last found an ally, when Doctor Hornway's stentorian tones called up the stairs:

"When are you two coming to supper? I've been waiting here for mine ten minutes and more."

"Come right down with us, young man," said Mrs. Hornway, turning to Eric. "My nephew Robert is a lawyer, you know, so he'll have lots of questions to ask you."

"But your husband?" objected our hero, who, hungry though he was, still retained a wholesome dread of being locked up as a lunatic.

"Oh, I'll make it all right with uncle," put in Manners. "If the worst comes to the worst, I can frighten him by representing the scandal it would cause to have it get abroad that he had been trying to lodge a sane person in the lunatic asylum."

Mrs. Hornway hurried ahead to have another place set at the table and explain matters to the doctor.

Eric lingered with young Manners, who provided him with the means of freshening up his toilet.

"I thought there was something odd about your

wanting to carry my bag this morning," he said. "So your cousin has cut off all your supplies, has he?"

"No, because I've never had any money through him yet," replied Eric, as they started down stairs together. "I had a few dollars in my pocket when the accident happened, and I have since earned a few more, but I lost it all this morning, as I told you."

"All?" repeated the other. "Then you are——"

"Without a cent to my name," finished Eric, as they entered the dining room.

How little did he imagine then the weight those half dozen words would come to have, or what misery would be caused him on account of them!

Doctor Hornway looked rather sheepish as he greeted Eric with: "So you thought to fool the old folks, eh? Well, I suppose it's no more than I deserve for jumping at conclusions the way I do. I was always so from a boy, when I concluded on first seeing a watch that because I couldn't tell the time by it then, I would never be able to do so."

Everybody laughed at this, and so whatever of embarrassment there might have been on the occasion, was dissipated.

Our hero enjoyed that tea more than any meal he had eaten since the breakfast with the Marchmans at Coney Island. Mr. Manners caused him to relate the whole story of his adventures since his arrival in America, and fully agreed with him in the opinion that bringing that McQuirl fellow into the presence of Mr. Tilbert would be the most effective means he could employ to settle the matter.

"But what do you think about that cricket cap affair?" Eric inquired. "Where do you suppose that bicycle thief got hold of it?"

"You are quite positive it was your cap?" asked Mr. Manners.

"Well, it doesn't seem possible that there can be another like it in this country," answered Eric. "And I think if I could find out where he got it I might be put on the track of a satchel I lost, for some one must have carried it off at the time of the accident. If I had that, or a good many of the articles in it, I think I might be able to convince Mr. Tilbert that he has made a mistake."

"I don't agree with you," responded Manners. "As you did not have the articles with you in the first place, he can very easily accuse you of having secured them from somebody who picked them up the night of the accident, as in fact you will have done. See?"

This was a point of view that it had not occurred to Eric to take, but he acknowledged the worth of it at once.

"Then you do not think my cousin really believes me to be an impostor," he added. "I have sometimes imagined that perhaps he was really persuaded in his own mind that the true Eric Dane was killed."

"I have no doubt in the matter. Your cousin—if you will excuse my saying so—is a rascal, and I would like nothing better than helping you to expose his perfidy. I am off on a brief vacation, and if you like I will devote the next day or so to making an effort to find that chap who sat next you in the car, and whose testimony, unless he has been bribed to perjure himself, which I think scarcely likely, will be worth everything to you. What do you say, Uncle Paul? Will you give us house room for a night or two, till we get this young millionaire established in his rights? He may be a magnate one of these days, and you will be glad to reflect that he is under obligations to you."

"Don't be so mercenary, Robert," returned the

old gentleman. "I'm so often testy and hasty that I'm only too glad to atone when an opportunity offers. I told Eric this afternoon that I wanted him to make us a little visit, and I now repeat the invitation in a different spirit."

Eric thanked them from his heart, and it was arranged that he and Mr. Manners should start for Cedarbrook the first thing in the morning. The plan of operations was talked over during the evening, and at ten o'clock Eric placed his head upon his pillow, feeling almost as contented as though he had already been recognized as the master of the estate at Cedarbrook.

And there was no foreshadowing of the evil that was to befall on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

WHEN Eric awoke the next morning, he found that his room mate, young Manners, had already gone down stairs.

"I wonder what time it is," he said to himself, hurriedly beginning to dress. "After all these people are doing for me, I hope I am not going to be late for breakfast."

He noticed that Mr. Manners's coat was stretched over the chair where he had hung it the night before.

"I suppose he's in his tennis rig," reflected Eric, and ten minutes later made his appearance in the dining room, expecting to find him there.

But only Mrs. Hornway was there to receive him.

"Oh, no, you are not late," she said, after a pleasant morning greeting. "The doctor has not come down yet, and Robert has taken a walk to the station to find out about trains. But breakfast will be right in, so you may as well sit down."

As she spoke, Mrs. Hornway took her place at the foot of the table and rang the bell for the servant.

Later Eric remarked that this bell was rung two or three times before it was answered, and that Mrs. Hornway finally exclaimed: "Where can Frances be?"

However, in the course of a few minutes the latter entered at one door and the doctor appeared at the other.

"Rob will be here in a minute," he said. "I saw him coming down the road at a great pace. He told me last night that he always liked to take a good walk before breakfast."

"Good morning, Eric," said the young man, as he took a seat at the table. "I thought you needed the rest, so I didn't wake you when I got up. Let me see, we've got three quarters of an hour before our train starts, and that reminds me I must see if I have a sufficiency of 'filthy lucre' with me to carry us through."

So saying, Mr. Manners put his hand into the inside pocket of his coat, which he had gone up stairs to put on before coming into the dining room.

"Why, what's this?" he exclaimed the next instant. "Not a dollar, and I am positive I had at least five, if no more! It is very strange!"

"Did you have your pocket book with you this morning?" asked the doctor. "You may have dropped it when you were climbing some of the fences you met in cutting across lots."

"No," was the reply. "It was here in the pocket of my coat, which I left hanging over a chair back in my room."

As he spoke young Manners's eyes rested on Eric.

"I have been robbed," the other went on, in cold, steady tones. "Can you throw any light on the mystery, Dane?"

Like some one rudely aroused from pleasant dreams to face deadly peril, Eric realized in a flash all that the question implied. He had been in the room with the coat after the owner's departure; they had only his own words as to his respectability and trustworthiness, so, in one sense, it seemed only natural that suspicion should fasten on him.

On the other hand, however, if he *had* stolen the money, it would seem odd that he should remain in

the house when he had had every opportunity of getting away.

"I saw your coat hanging over the chair back," he replied, in a voice which he tried to keep steady. "That is all I know about it."

"But not all that *we* care to know," burst forth Doctor Hornway, rising from his seat, and speaking with even greater vehemence than he had displayed when Eric had first met him. "Here is a guest of mine loses every cent that has been left in his coat pocket in a room shared with a stranger, of whom we know absolutely nothing, except that money is what he wants."

"Oh, Paul, Paul," faintly pleaded his wife. "Perhaps——"

"There is no perhaps about it, Priscilla," sharply retorted the old man. "Either this fellow, who calls himself Eric Dane, did or did not take the money, which can only be proved by a strict examination. Robert, you search him, or I shall."

Young Manners had grown pale, but his lips were compressed, as he signed to Eric to accompany him into the front room.

"I would rather have lost forty times the amount through my own carelessness than that this should happen," he said, as he closed the door on them.

"I understand and thank you," replied Eric, hoarsely. "I am perfectly willing to be searched, and repeat now what I told you last night, that I have not a single cent in my possession."

"Heaven knows I want to believe you, Dane," returned the other, as he began the task that was so repugnant to him. "But you must see for yourself how much circumstances are against you, and when Uncle Paul is aroused nothing will satisfy him but undoubted proof of innocence."

Pocket after pocket was explored in coat, vest and

trousers, but just as Manners was about to announce that he was satisfied, Doctor Hornway made his appearance in the room.

"Be thorough now, Robert," he commanded. "Have you examined the pistol pocket yet?"

"No he hasn't," broke out Eric, impulsively, throwing off his coat in order to show his fearlessness in the matter of investigation. "Please don't overlook anything. I declare that I know no more of what has become of Mr. Manners's money than the dead."

"There is nothing here, sir," said the nephew, withdrawing his hand from the hip pocket with a half sigh of relief.

"And you have looked everywhere else?" persisted the doctor.

"Everywhere."

"But I see that his vest is buttoned tightly," went on the uncle. "Have you forgotten that it contains or ought to contain an *inside* pocket on the right hand side? I know it is very seldom used, but I remember once finding in it the name and address of a man who had fallen in a fit in the street, and whom I was called to attend."

What was it that caused Eric's heart to give a wild leap in his breast at these words, the color to rush into his face and then as suddenly recede, leaving him pale as snow and with a tremor running through his body that Manners could not fail to notice as he proceeded to act on the doctor's suggestion?

Resisting with difficulty the impulse to clap his own hands to the pocket, Eric waited for what he feared was the inevitable. A second more, and those fears were all too keenly realized.

"By George, there *is* money here," exclaimed Manners, adding involuntarily: "And only last night he told me he had not a cent to his name?"

As he spoke, he drew out a flat roll of bills!

"The rascally scoundrel!" exclaimed the doctor, striking out into the air right and left with his arms, and then bringing them back with resounding thuds against his own chest. "So we have been cherishing a viper in our midst!"

"But are you sure those are the bills you lost, Robert?" here interposed Mrs. Hornway, who had followed her husband into the room.

"I cannot remember just what I had," replied Manners. "But I know there were three or four small bills, and those are what I have found."

"They are mine, though," began Eric, struggling to emerge from the daze of horror into which he had been thrown by the discovery. "I can explain——"

"But you have only just explained that you were absolutely penniless," interrupted Mr. Manners, whose manner toward our hero had now passed from compassionate doubt to contemptuous conviction.

"I thought I was," went on Eric, "till Doctor Hornway spoke of that inside vest pocket. I must have put my money there by mistake for my inside coat pocket yesterday morning and——"

"A likely story indeed," burst forth the irate doctor. Then, turning to his nephew, he added: "Robert, do you wish to prosecute this young thief?"

"No, I have my money back, and I hope this dismal failure will be lesson enough for the poor fellow, whom I pity with all my heart. Let him go."

"Umph," grunted the doctor. "Perhaps we're too easy on him; but it does seem a pity to have such a likely looking young man housed with jail birds where he'd be apt to learn even worse tricks than trying to pass himself off for a dead man."

Eric tried to speak, but his throat was parched and his tongue refused to render service. He heard a sob

in the corner, and glancing over saw Mrs. Hornway with her face buried in her handkerchief.

Quickly crossing the room, our hero passed close to her, and by a great effort summoned voice enough to whisper : "I am innocent." Then, taking his hat from the stand in the hall, he went out into the dazzling sunshine without another word.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT CEDARBROOK AGAIN.

As Eric turned to close the gate he saw the doctor standing in the doorway looking after him.

"To make sure I don't carry anything from the place with me," he reflected bitterly.

He was fairly stunned by this last turn his wheel of fortune had given. He had no plans, and, for the moment, no hopes. He walked on mechanically not knowing whither he was going, nor caring.

"Oh, what an idiot I have been," he muttered. "Here I've been going about for a day or two with over five dollars in my pocket, and thinking that I hadn't a penny."

At first he had been quite mystified regarding the manner in which the money he supposed he had lost came to be discovered in a pocket which he was confident he had never used. But little by little it all became clear to him.

"I was in my shirt sleeves," he remembered, "when I got that note of Mr. Banner's at the Medfords', and I sat down straight away to count my money. Then when Boltboy spoke to me from the bed so suddenly, I caught it all up and stuffed it out of sight into an inside pocket, thinking I had my coat on. And there it has been ever since, while I have carried bags to earn ferry money, and all the rest of it. But now I really am penniless. I wonder

if I couldn't have that Manners fellow arrested for stealing! For it's my money he's got, and not his."

Poor Eric! He had been so full of hope but a brief while before, that the sudden dashing away of the cup from his lips had left him almost despairing.

But gradually his better nature asserted itself.

The whistle of a locomotive now sounding ahead of him reminded him of the plan he had formed while locked up in the room at the Hornways'.

"I am free, too; that is another thing I have to be grateful for," he told himself, as he quickened his steps.

The next moment he had halted suddenly and was, tearing open his vest. "The fifteen cents!" he exclaimed. "I know I had that much in silver at the Medfords', and I don't remember seeing it in Manners's hand when he took the bills out. It must be at the bottom of that pocket yet."

And it was. A dime and a nickel were snuggled down into a corner, and when Eric drew them out he felt for the moment positively rich.

"That ought to take me from here to Cedarbrook on the train," he reflected. Then he hesitated. Should he spend it for that which he could attain by other means, that is, by walking, or save it for food?

"But I will have to spend it for my dinner, any way, if I go afoot," he reflected. "Whereas the train will take me to Cedarbrook in less than half an hour, leaving me all the rest of the morning to work on my case. And who knows but that before I'm very hungry again I won't have found that McQuirl fellow, and proved to John Tilbert's satisfaction, or perhaps disgust, that I am what I claim to be?"

Buoyed up by this hope, Eric quickened his steps and presently reached the railroad track.

It was then a simple matter to keep the line in sight till it brought him to a station.

He reached the latter five minutes before the time at which the train he and Mr. Manners were to have taken was due. And the fare to Cedarbrook was only ten cents, so he would still have money in his pocket when he got there.

Fifteen minutes later he was walking up the well remembered avenue leading by the Dane property. During the brief journey he had mapped out in his mind a plan of action.

He would skirt the Tilbert grounds till he came in a line with the stables, then approach the latter by the rear driveway, which he had noticed on his former visit, and fall into conversation with the coachman.

He disliked intensely the idea of having to dodge a possible meeting with the family in this way, but under the circumstances it seemed the wisest course to pursue.

There were but few people astir, villages of the Cedarbrook stamp being usually very quiet during the forenoon. Indeed, Eric saw no one on either side of the street, hence the footsteps of some one walking rather rapidly behind him were heard with unusual distinctness.

Thus it came to pass that Eric could not very well avoid paying particular attention to them, and as he turned down the side street that skirted the edge of the Dane property, he naturally looked back to see who it was.

What was his astonishment to discover that the solitary pedestrian was Doctor Hornway!

"He must have come up on the train with me," he reflected, "without my knowing it."

This was quite possible, as Eric had been the first to board the cars, and also the first to leave them.

"But what can he be doing up here?" he asked himself.

The next instant the question was partly answered by the fact that the old gentleman turned in at the drive and walked up to Mr. Tilbert's front door.

"I am afraid that means trouble for me," muttered Eric, coming to a standstill. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if he'd take this little trip on the sudden impulse that it was his duty to tell John Tilbert what he knew about me."

What was to be done? His cousin would be only too willing to believe such a tale as Doctor Hornway would have to tell, and in all likelihood take active measures to prevent Eric from ever gaining access to the grounds.

"If I can only see the coachman before Doctor Hornway has a chance to get his interview!"

Thus reflecting Eric walked rapidly on, and in two minutes reached the stables. They were very handsome ones, requiring the services of two or three men, besides the coachman, to take care of them and the half dozen horses they housed.

"Which of you is the coachman?" began Eric, addressing himself to a group of three, one of whom was cleaning chains by rattling them to the tune of sleigh bells in a bag, while the other two were sponging the wheels of a pony cart that had just come in.

"None of us," laughed he with the chains. Then, raising his voice, he called: "Jim, here's a young gentlemine would like to spake wid you."

At this summons, a smooth shaven, good looking young Irishman came forward, to whom Eric hurriedly put the question: "Do you remember driving home a young fellow who was here last Tuesday night?"

"Faith, sure I do," was the response. "But you're not going to be tellin' me that that same is yersilf. He was half a head shorter nor you be, I'd swear to in a court o' justice."

“Oh, no, I’m not the one,” replied Eric. “But I want to see him, and if you could tell me where he lives I’d be ever so much obliged.”

“Well, it’s about seven mile from here——”

“Seize that fellow!”

It was Mr. Tilbert’s voice, and Mr. Tilbert himself, with a brow as lowering as a thunder cloud, stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FLIGHT.

For an instant or two the stablemen looked at their employer as though they felt that they had not caught his meaning.

Then Doctor Hornway interposed.

"Excuse me, Mr. Tilbert," he said, "but I think it is scarcely necessary to use force with the young man. He may be depraved, but I assure you he is quite tractable. Now that he is aware that you know our experience with him, I think he will not be apt to trouble you again."

Mr. Tilbert had listened to this interruption with scarcely repressed impatience. He toyed with his watch chain, bit his lip and tapped with his patent leather shoe on the ground.

"You will excuse me, Doctor Hornway," he struck in with his calm, cold tone, as soon as the other paused, "but I must beg to differ with you. I have permitted this fellow to go scot free once already, and I think I owe it to the community to put a stop to his career."

Meanwhile the men had been taking in the strange scene with open mouthed wonder. Eric remained standing perfectly quiet, with his eyes fixed on Mr. Tilbert. He could see that the latter was restive under that steady gaze.

But now he turned, and addressed himself directly to our hero.

"What was your object in coming here this morning?" he asked.

"I came on business connected with the matter of obtaining proofs to secure me my rights," replied Eric, trying to speak as calmly as possible, although, as may be imagined, he was inwardly boiling at the indignities heaped upon him.

He knew, however, that an outburst of wrath on his part would injure rather than help him; hence the curb he endeavored to place upon himself.

"But I wish to know the particular reason you had for coming to my stables and engaging in conversation with my employees," persisted Mr. Tilbert.

"And I am not yet prepared to state it," replied our hero, who feared that should his cousin obtain a hint of his intentions respecting the McQuirl boy, he would leave no stone unturned to thwart him.

"James," said Mr. Tilbert, turning to his coachman, "will you be kind enough to inform me what this young man wanted of you before I came up?"

"He was askin' me," replied James, "where that young gintlemin lived as I drove home that night afther he had tould you, sorr, of Mистер Eric's bein' killed on the railway."

On hearing this Mr. Tilbert could not prevent a faintly perceptible catching of the breath, indicative of both surprise and satisfaction. He had evidently not thought of this contingency, and was glad to have been put on his guard.

But "Oh, that was it," was all he said, adding: "I wish all of you to understand that I forbid you ever again exchanging a syllable of conversation with this fellow as long as you are in my employ."

Eric felt as if he should choke with the indignation that welled up within him. But what could he do?

To have come out with the assertion of his real

identity, and a denunciation of his cousin as a scheming usurper, would have resulted only in a scene that could do him no possible good.

However, as his hope of obtaining the desired address at the stable was now out of the question, and as it seemed that Mr. Tilbert was determined on making a prisoner of him, Eric, reflecting that discretion is the better part of valor, resolved on striking out for liberty.

In an instant his mind was made up. He was a good jumper. Indeed, he had carried off a prize for a running leap at Eton, and although flight seemed ignominious, he felt that under the circumstances it was justifiable.

Up to this moment, as has been said, he had remained calm and motionless, which was now all in his favor. He was standing with his face toward the hedge that skirted the grounds at a distance of some thirty feet from the side of the stable.

He measured its height with his eye, gathered all his energies together, and just as Mr. Tilbert finished speaking, he made a sudden dash.

Fleet as a deer he sped across the strip of lawn, and just as the group he had left had collected their faculties sufficiently to cry out, he left the ground and in a graceful curve cleared the hedge, landing on his feet on the road without.

Down this he turned, in the direction that appeared to lead away from the populous parts of the village, and ran with a speed that he had never equaled even in the most exciting games of hare and hounds at school.

In fact, he was a good eighth of a mile away before any of his pursuers succeeded in reaching the road.

"It would be all over with me now if I was in town," he reflected, as he heard the wild cries of

"Hi there! Stop thief!" behind him. But as there was nobody else around to hear them but a few lazy cows on one hand, and a flock of grazing sheep on the other, there seemed to be no immediate reason to fear the consequences.

There were no houses beyond the Tilberts' on this side street, which appeared to be but little traveled, judging from the grass that cropped up here and there.

About half a mile further on was a wood, the same, Eric thought, as that in which he had had his encounter with the tramp.

By a hasty glance thrown over his shoulder now and then he saw that he was rapidly drawing away from the Irishmen who were giving chase; and he had just begun to congratulate himself on the ease with which he had escaped, when a two seated phaeton turned into the road ahead of him.

A coachman in livery was on the front seat driving, while a large lady in a flaring straw hat sat behind him.

"Hallo there, stop thief! Stop that boy!" shouted one of the Tilbert men, as the carriage approached.

Resolved to sell his liberty as dearly as possible, Eric kept his eye fixed on the movements of the phaeton, and relaxed not an iota in his speed.

Once more the pursuers called for help, and the coachman headed his horse across our hero's path.

Eric swerved to the other side of the road, and kept steadily on, whereupon the coachman threw down the lines, and prepared to give chase on foot.

"Oh, Patrick, don't leave the horse!" shrieked the lady.

"But here comes an escaped thafe, mum," responded Patrick, who was evidently itching to take a hand in the affair.

His mistress, however, declared that if all the forty thieves were loose, he shouldn't leave her alone in that carriage, and during the discussion Eric had shot past like a flash.

On and on he sped, until finally he reached the confines of the wood.

But he did not stop yet. He dashed in among the trees, stumbling over stumps and trailing vines, until he could see no sign of a clearing on any side.

Then, and only then, did he slacken speed; and selecting a mossy knoll running up to the foot of a great oak, he threw himself at full length upon the soft sod, and listened.

But there was not a sound to be heard but the twitter of the birds overhead and the wild beating of his heart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GOAL IN SIGHT.

"I WONDER if I will ever dare live in Cedarbrook, even after I am acknowledged," mused poor Eric, as panting for breath, he set about planning his next move. "If I had a strong imagination, I might consider myself in the light of a persecuted prince, whose subjects have risen in rebellion and banished him from their kingdom. Still, I can't believe that any prince ever took to his heels and ran for dear life, with a mob of stablemen shouting 'Stop thief!' after him."

The fact that he was not yet out of the woods, albeit literally in them, speedily drew his thoughts from such comparisons to fix them on the pressing problem of how he should prosecute his search for the McQuirl boy, now that it was manifestly impossible for him to obtain the latter's address through the Tilbert coachman.

"Seven miles from here," Eric reflected. "That is a clew, to be sure, but a mighty slender one. Stop, though. Is it likely that he would have come out of his way that night to tell that news about me? He must have merely stopped over at the Cedarbrook station on his way home, so I think I will be pretty safe in deciding that that seven miles is not toward Jersey City, but farther on along the line."

Having come to this conclusion, he began to feel quite hopeful, receiving a set back, however, when

he suddenly recollected that Mr. Tilbert, having now received warning of his intentions, might contrive to block his path.

The "what to do" having been resolved on, it now remained to settle the "how to do it."

In the first place, Eric could not be certain that the borders of the wood were not lined with men deputed by Mr. Tilbert to seize him as soon as he made his appearance. Indeed, his ears were on a continual strain to catch the faintest sound of footsteps that might be even then approaching his retreat.

Then, again, how was he to live while prosecuting his search?

He had eaten only half a breakfast at the Hornways', and was already beginning to feel hungry.

"I must stick to my original intention," he decided, "and try to obtain work at some place near that McQuirl's home. If Percy hit it anywhere near what it is, the fellow's name must certainly be odd enough for any of his neighbors to tell me the rest of it when I mention that."

His programme having been mapped out thus far, he began to grow impatient to begin.

"I've got five cents in my pocket," he recollected, "and if I start to walk that seven miles now, that will get me enough lunch to keep me up till I get there about two or three o'clock."

Urged by these practical considerations, Eric resolved to find his way to the railroad track, and follow this guide to the unknown town which was seven miles off. He judged that over half an hour had elapsed since he had ceased his flight; he had quite recovered from his exhaustion, and there were no signs of pursuit.

So he started off in the direction from which he had a few moments before heard a locomotive whis-

tle, and in the course of ten minutes found himself on the borders of a meadow that intervened between the woods and the track.

There was no one in sight. The scene lay bathed in the mellow sunshine of early autumn, and seemed as peaceful as a Sabbath noon. Climbing up an embankment to a level with the rails, Eric struck into a good swinging pace along the outer edge, for he did not believe in track walking.

He knew that he was going away from Cedarbrook, and was equally certain—from the absence of certain landmarks he had noted on his way up that morning—that he was not moving in the direction of Jersey City.

So he took heart of hope and trudged cheerfully on. Trains passed him in both directions, and presently he came to a station.

"How far is Cedarbrook from here?" he inquired of the flagman at the crossing.

"Two miles, but sure you're going the wrong way for it," was the reply.

"Oh, I don't want to go there," went on Eric, "I've just come from it. Perhaps you can tell me the name of the town that is seven miles from Cedarbrook in this direction."

"Troth, an' that would be South Oxford."

"Then that must be five miles from here. Is it a large place?"

"Middlin'. There do be a turntable, and some of the trains on the road start from there."

"Thank you," and Eric hurried on, glancing in at the clock in the waiting room as he went by.

It was a quarter past eleven, almost lunch time, as he reflected with some concern.

However, about half a mile further on he passed an orchard which had dropped a portion of its superabundant harvest outside of the fence.

Pickers were at work inside, and Eric called out to know if he might take some of the apples lying on the ground.

"As many as you like, young man," answered a ruddy faced farmer, who was superintending operations.

So our hero sat down on the grass and ate until he could eat no more, then stuffed his pockets full, and, making a mental note of the location of the orchard with a view to remembering the owner when he "came into his property," he expressed his obligations and took up his tramp again.

Two more stations were passed, and at length, about one o'clock, he approached a region where there was much backing up and down of engines, switching of trains and shrieking of whistles.

"Yes, this is South Oxford," replied a brakeman, who had just stepped off a car he had brought to a standstill on a siding, and to whom our hero had put the question.

He was a very pleasant looking young man, with light hair and mustache, and a pair of such very blue eyes that once seen they were not easily forgotten.

"I've met that fellow somewhere before," Eric told himself, as he resumed his walk.

He had not gone ten paces, however, when he heard some one coming up rapidly behind him. It was the brakeman, who joined him and said: "Excuse me, but will you tell me how the young lady is?"

"What young lady?" exclaimed Eric, utterly at a loss to know what the fellow meant.

"The young lady that you helped out of the car the night of the accident. She seemed kind of faint just before you got aboard the Newark train."

"Oh!" ejaculated Eric, and a host of memories

came thronging back upon him, among them the recollection of where he had seen the brakeman before.

He had been on that ill fated train, and was the one who had replied to our hero's question as to how many had escaped from that last car, with the announcement that he had himself helped out a boy and an old lady with a cat.

The boy must have been the very person of whom he was now in search, and perhaps this man knew his name and all about him.

"The young lady recovered from the shock almost immediately," he went on the next instant. "She is an actress, you know, and was able to appear the next night but one. I had never met her before, though. I thought I knew your face, and am very glad I met you. You may be able to render me a great service."

"How is that?" inquired the other, looking puzzled in his turn.

"I will tell you," continued Eric. They were walking between the tracks toward the station, which was still some distance off. "If you remember about my being with that young lady, you probably haven't forgotten that you told me you had helped a boy out of the window of that car."

"Yes, and there was one old lady with a cat, too. Were they any relation to you?"

"No, but I would like very much to know the name of the boy. Did he tell you what it was?"

"Yes," replied the brakeman with a laugh. "He was terribly scared, and as soon as he caught sight of me while he was wriggling his way out of that window, he cried out, 'Help, help! I'm Horace McQuillam, of South Oxford.' You see, he was afraid we wouldn't know where he belonged if he got stunned and couldn't talk. But he only got his arm

sprained, and some scratches on his face. He made more fuss about it, though, than the old lady with the cat. She was pretty badly bruised, but didn't give a whimper."

But Eric scarcely heard the latter sentences. The mention of the name McQuillam coupled with South Oxford convinced him that he was on the right track at last, and what was more, very near the terminus of his quest besides.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VANISHED WITNESS.

"Do you happen to know just where this Horace McQuillam lives here in South Oxford?"

This was Eric's question on the resumption of the conversation between himself and the brakeman, which had been interrupted by the passage of an express.

"Yes, I found out all about him afterwards. His father is a butcher, and the family live on Maple Street, not far from where I do. Horace is a clerk in the butcher shop. If you want to go there, I'll show you the way, if you'll wait three minutes till I change my coat and cap."

"I should say I did want to go there," responded Eric, "and I can't say how much obliged to you I am for what you have told me. Here, won't you have an apple?"

"Indeed I will and much obliged. I'll be back in a minute," and this genial railway official disappeared within the station building, leaving our hero in a state of the wildest excitement.

"The last link is forged," he told himself. "All that will be left to do will be to get my chain of evidence back to Cedarbrook. Then we'll see what Mr. John Tilbert will have to say for himself."

The brakeman, in citizen's coat and derby hat, now rejoined him and led the way up into the town. He

was on his way home to dinner, it appeared, and was off duty until three o'clock.

"There's the shop," he said, at the end of a five minutes' walk, pointing to a brilliant red signboard across the street, which set forth the fact that beneath it was to be found the "Home Market!"

"I am ever so much obliged to you," said Eric.

"Oh, that's all right," called out the young brakeman as he turned down a side street. "Good by."

"Good by to you," responded our hero, adding to himself: "There's another fellow to be remembered when I become a man of property."

Then he hastened across the street and entered the butcher shop.

It was a dull time of day for trade in the meat line. Indeed, not a rib, leg or loin was visible, all having been either already sold or consigned to the ice chest. A big man in a white apron, with a newspaper over his face, was dozing in a chair tilted back against the wall.

"Ahem!"

Eric cleared his throat and shuffled his feet on the sawdust covered floor to attract attention.

"Oh, who is it?" yawned the big man, pulling the paper off his face and trying to look business-like.

"Is Mr. Horace McQuillam in?" asked Eric.

"Young Hoddy? Well, you've just missed him."

"Missed him?" echoed Eric. "Why, where has he gone?"

"I don't just know, but if you will step up stairs perhaps Mr. or Mrs. McQuillam can tell you."

Filled with a nameless dread, Eric went out at the side door the big man held open for him and ascended by the dark stairway to the floor above. His knock at the door at the end of the front hallway was not answered immediately.

Indeed, such a clatter of tongues, mingled with the rattle of knives and forks came from behind a door at the rear that it was small wonder that nobody heard him. He knocked again, this time with both hands, and then he heard a woman's voice say "Hush! I think I heard somebody at the parlor door."

Taking this as a hint to repeat the announcement of his presence, Eric rapped once more, and then through the transom came the sound of the command: "Benny, run and see who's there."

The next moment the door at which our hero was standing was opened by a mite of a boy in a little blue checked pinafore, bearing in one hand a slice of bread, topped with a mixture of butter and sugar.

"Can I see Mr. or Mrs. McQuillam?" inquired Eric.

As a matter of fact he was looking straight at two persons seated at dinner in the back room, who, he felt certain, were Horace's father and mother.

"Hey?" drawled the boy, who had been so absorbed in looking at the visitor that he had paid no heed to what he said.

Eric repeated his request, this time so loudly that Mrs. McQuillam heard it and came bustling out.

"I am sorry to interrupt your dinner," began Eric, "but I will detain you only for a moment. I wished to know where your son Horace has gone. They told me——"

"Oh, yes, I never was so amazed in all my life," broke in Mrs. McQuillam. "Set right down and I'll tell you all about it. Benny take that elephant of yours off the sofa. Well, as I was sayin', we never was so amazed. Hoddy's always been a good boy enough, but we never thought as he was the kind to make strangers take to him so. But then I s'pose

they never got over his kindness that night in stopping over to tell them their cousin was killed. I was quite beat out when Hoddy told me he'd done it, for I never had an idea he was that thoughtful like. But do it he did, and this mornin' not more than an hour ago, up comes a message from the gentleman that he wants Hoddy to go on a camping out trip to some woods or other away up north. He must go right off, the man said, and he helped us pack up Hoddy's things."

"When—how long is he going to stay?" gasped Eric, as Mrs. McQuillam paused to take a long breath.

He had been mentally stunned for an instant by the news that the fellow he had been trying for so long to find had eluded him just as success seemed ready to crown his quest.

"There wasn't a thing said about that," went on the voluble Mrs. McQuillam. "You know Hoddy hasn't been able to do much in the shop since he hurt his arm in the accident, so Mr. Tilbert said he might just as well be takin' a vacation, having a good time of it, as mopin' here at home. Wasn't it beautiful of him?"

Eric could not help giving a slight start at the mention of Mr. Tilbert's name. He had had, of course, not the slightest doubt that his wily cousin was at the bottom of this scheme to get this very important witness out of the way, but it was somewhat of a shock, nevertheless, to have the fact thus hopelessly confirmed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEFORE THE MAGISTRATE.

"THEN you cannot give me your son's address," Eric inquired of Mrs. McQuillam, as he rose to his feet, realizing in a dazed sort of way that it was time for him to go, yet not knowing which way he should turn when he reached the street.

"No, the man said they were going where there wasn't any post office, an' that Hoddy would be taken good care of till they brought him back. Did you want to see him particularly?"

"Yes, but I will have to call again ; perhaps in a month from now. Good afternoon. I am sorry to have interrupted your dinner," and forcing a smile, Eric hurried off, leaving Mrs. McQuillam with her mouth ajar, ready to ask twenty questions she had been reserving till she should have descanted at length upon the good fortune that had befallen "Hoddy."

"If any chap needed a good supply of cheerfulness it's one Eric Dane, killed on last Tuesday night, whose ghost is wandering in broad day about the streets of South Oxford, with only five cents and three apples in its pockets, and not a roof to cover its head." Thus reflected our hero, who was indeed now reduced to the most desperate straits of his experience. Heretofore he had always before him the hope of obtaining that proof which was all he needed to secure him not only the necessities of life, but luxuries and a fortune.

"But Tilbert can't keep that fellow away without an address forever," he told himself. "If I choose to stay here till he comes back, I can make him prove my identity then as well as now. So Mr. Tilbert is only putting off the evil day for himself."

At this instant a hand was laid on his shoulder, and an emphatic voice exclaimed: "You are my prisoner!"

Eric wheeled around, and found himself in the grasp of a tall, heavily built man, with a bushy black beard, and a pair of gray eyes that seemed to look right through him. A little distance behind stood one of the men from Mr. Tilbert's stable, who had evidently pointed him out to the officer.

"What do you mean? What have I done?" cried Eric, indignantly. He made no attempt to shake himself free, but saw at once that that would be useless.

"You are charged with attempted burglary, actual theft, and general vagrancy. Oh, you needn't fear but we have plenty of warrant for taking you."

"And what are you going to do with me?"

"Lodge you in the county jail, where you ought to have been three days ago. Come along, now."

"Can't I have a trial?" inquired Eric.

"Oh, of course you'll be examined by Justice Goyle for a preliminary," replied the officer. "But here we are now," and he led the way up the steps to a large, square brick building, one side of which was guarded by iron barred windows.

Turning to the left from the broad corridor, Eric was ushered into a room scantily furnished with two chairs and a desk.

Behind the latter sat a queer looking man, between forty and fifty years of age, with a cast in one eye and a ridge of gray running diagonally across his otherwise black head of hair. He wore steel

rimmed spectacles, and altogether had an extremely fierce aspect.

Eric had only time to make these observations, when a carriage, driven at a high rate of speed, came to a stop before the building, and through the window our hero saw Doctor Hornway, Rob Manners and Mr. Tilbert alight therefrom.

"The gentlemen who are to prefer the charges against the prisoner," explained the officer to the justice, with a wave of his hand toward the carriage.

"Oh," murmured the justice, in a weak, faint voice, which contrasted so forcibly with his terrifying aspect, that, in spite of his troubles, Eric almost smiled.

The next moment the three plaintiffs entered the room.

"So you've caught him," said Mr. Tilbert, in a voice of undisguised gratification, as his eyes fell on our hero, standing between the officer and the stableman.

"Yes, sir," replied the former; "your man here made good time on that horse he rode, and we spotted the young rascal just as he came out of that butcher shop where you said he'd gone."

"Now, gentlemen," piped up the magistrate, "will you be kind enough to state the act or acts for which you wish the prisoner committed?"

"Mr. Manners," said Mr. Tilbert, "will you please make your statement of facts."

"I spent last night," began the young man, "at the house of my uncle, Doctor Hornway, who is here with us now. I occupied the spare room on the second floor, found the prisoner in a trunk in a closet, and recognized him as the boy who had earlier in the day carried my satchel to the ferry in New York for me. I accepted his explanation of being held as

a lunatic by Doctor Hornway, as a plausible one, and that night occupied the same room with him. This morning I took a walk to the railroad station before breakfast, leaving my coat containing my pocket book over a chair back in the room.

"On the evening previous, I may here mention, the prisoner told me that he was absolutely without funds, having lost his last cent in some mysterious fashion that very morning. To resume, at the breakfast table I had occasion to refer to my pocketbook when I discovered that all the money in it amounting to some five dollars, was gone. My uncle insisted on having the prisoner searched, which being done, five dollars was found in his inside vest pocket."

"Have you anything to say to this charge, young man?" asked the justice, turning toward our hero.

"Nothing, except that I did not know the money was there, that it was mine, and has been as really stolen from me as though I had had my pocket picked."

"Take care, young man," here interposed Mr. Tilbert. "Remember you are in a court of justice, and that a penalty is attached to contempt."

"But I do not quite understand," said the justice, looking from one to another of his visitors with a half puzzled, half pleading expression on his countenance, which would have been denominated meek were it not for the sinister look imparted to it by the faulty eye. "What was this young man doing in a trunk? Had that any connection with his business of carrying satchels?"

"My uncle, I think, can explain that part of the affair," replied young Manners, smiling at the doctor's frantic gestures to him to be silent.

"Then we should most certainly like to hear from Mr.——"

"Doctor Hornway," suggested the nephew.

"Thank you," went on the justice in his childish tones. "Will Doctor Hornway kindly favor us with an account of how the prisoner came to be confined in a trunk in a closet in his house?"

"I didn't confine him there," blurted out the doctor, who was evidently by no means pleased at the turn the line of evidence had taken. "He got in of his own accord."

"Were you aware that he was in your house, Doctor Hornway?" persisted the magistrate.

"Certainly I was. I brought him there myself."

"With what object? Your nephew has just stated that the prisoner carried his satchel down to the ferry for him, from which I infer that the said prisoner was a boy such as you might hire to do chores about the house. And yet it seems your nephew occupied the same room with him. Please elucidate more clearly."

The justice's voice was childish, but he evidently had a head for business, and Eric began to feel hopeful as he noted this and the apparent annoyance it caused two of his prosecutors. Mr. Tilbert was biting his lip and tapping the floor with that restless patent leather shoe, while Doctor Hornway looked decidedly foolish.

"I met him in front of the Silver Cup tavern," answered the latter, "and from the way he talked I took him for a lunatic that had recently escaped from the asylum at Morris Meadows. So I brought him home with me, intending to take him over to the asylum this morning."

"But I still fail to see what all this has to do with the prisoner being discovered inside a trunk," objected the justice.

"He crept in there himself, thinking thus to escape from the house," Rob Manners here interposed, adding a brief description of the plan our hero had in view on the occasion.

"And do you still consider him of unsound mind, Doctor Hornway?" asked the justice.

"No, I consider him a thief," bluntly responded the physician.

"Then, as you were mistaken in one case," persisted the justice, "may it not be possible that you, sir," (turning to Rob Manners) "are at fault in the other? You did not see the prisoner take the money from your coat pocket, nor can you swear that the bills were exactly the ones you have lost."

"No, sir," replied Manners, frankly. "I cannot."

"Young man," went on the justice, turning suddenly towards our hero, "what is your name?"

"Eric Dane."

"He is an impostor, Justice Goyle," interposed Mr. Tilbert, stepping forward at this juncture. "That is not his name, but that of my poor cousin who was killed in that fearful holocaust on the railroad last Tuesday night. Twice has this fellow forced his way into my place at Cedarbrook with an assertion of his absurd claim, for the establishment of which he can furnish not a shadow of proof. I wish now to appeal to the law for protection from this nuisance."

"Then there are two charges against the prisoner," remarked the magistrate, in his easy tones, checking them off on his fingers, "theft and false representations. Perhaps the investigation of the latter may furnish us with more conclusive proof of the former. I remember now to have read in the papers the sad fate of one Eric Dane, heir to a large property in Cedarbrook. Officer, will you bring chairs that we may proceed comfortably to a thorough sifting of this interesting case."

CHAPTER XXX.

ERIC'S CLAIM IS CONSIDERED.

MR. JOHN TILBERT was evidently much annoyed at the turn affairs had taken. He knew Justice Goyle by sight, and from his appearance had doubtless felt assured that he was just the sort of magistrate to commit an alleged offender to jail at once, deferring any particular examination into his case until the grand jury met, which would not occur till October.

The officer having returned with chairs, they all seated themselves, and Justice Goyle resumed.

"Mr. Tilbert," he began, "you evidently do not know this cousin of yours, Eric Dane, by sight, or an impostor would be very foolish to endeavor to foist himself upon you. Am I correct thus far?"

"You are, sir."

"Neither did you identify the body of your unfortunate cousin before giving it burial, which fact this claimant must also have known. Is this not true?"

"It is. My cousin was among those who were cremated in the last car?"

"What proof have you of the fact?"

"Proof!" exclaimed Mr. Tilbert. "Why, I have the whole story from the lips of a young man with whom my lamented cousin became acquainted on the train."

"And this young man, where is he now?"

"That I do not know. He has gone off on a camping out trip somewhere in the Maine woods."

"That is unfortunate. I should like to have put some questions to him. Did he see this cousin of yours actually cut off by the flames?"

"He was in such danger himself that he has no recollection of anything further than seeing the seat which he and Eric had occupied together a raging mass of fire."

"But why could your cousin not have escaped as well as this other young man?"

"If he had, would he not be apt to have some proof to show that he was what he claimed to be? I beg to remind you, Judge Goyle, that my cousin was heir to a large fortune, so the temptation to personate him under the existing circumstances was very great."

"Very well; I should now like to put a few questions to the young man himself," rejoined the magistrate. Then addressing himself to our hero, he continued: "How does it happen that you have nothing to show that you are the individual you claim to be? Have you no letters of introduction, or anything of that sort?"

"I had all those," replied Eric, "but they were all in the wallet I happened to have in my hand at the time the accident occurred, and which I have not seen since. I have reason to believe, however, that they are all in the possession of my cousin, Mr. Tilbert."

"Is that the case, Mr. Tilbert?" pursued the justice. "Have you the letters and memoranda belonging to this Eric Dane, who is, you claim, deceased?"

Mr. Tilbert hesitated for the fraction of a second, and then answered: "I have. They were picked up by the young man I have already mentioned, and brought to me."

"Then how could you expect the prisoner to have that which was in your own possession?"

Mr. Tilbert's cheek paled for an instant, then he forced a laugh and answered lightly: "Oh, of course I didn't expect him to have that which I knew I had myself, although, from Mr. Manners's experience with him, I should say he was quite capable of appropriating it without my knowledge."

"Have you no friends who can identify you?" went on Justice Goyle, again turning to Eric.

"None here, unfortunately," he replied. "The Marchmans, with whom I spent Tuesday night, sailed the next morning on a yachting cruise for Newfoundland."

"That is unfortunate, very, for you," commented the magistrate, in a tone that struck a chill to Eric's heart, that had but just now begun to grow warm with hope.

"It is of a piece with his lame story of not knowing he had that money in his vest pocket," added Mr. Tilbert, somewhat maliciously.

"There is one other person who could prove the truth of what I say," Eric resumed, hastily. "It is Horace McQuillam, the fellow who sat next me in the car, and who carried to Mr. Tilbert the news of my death. He lives here in South Oxford, where I came to find him, but too late."

"There it is again," once more interjected Mr. Tilbert. "There is always something in the way of his giving a satisfactory account of himself."

"What caused you to think the prisoner was of unsound mind?" asked the justice, turning suddenly to Doctor Hornway.

"Because he said his name was Eric Dane, whose death I had read of in the papers," promptly answered the doctor.

"And now you think he claims the name because he is not a lunatic but an impostor?"

"Exactly."

"May I say something more?" asked Eric, judging from a movement of the justice that the latter's mind was about made up.

"Certainly, if it is to the point," was the answer.

"Well, if you will send around to the Home Market on Maple Street, Mrs. McQuillam, the mother of Horace, will tell you that her son has been sent away by Mr. Tilbert himself."

"I fail to see the significance of such a piece of evidence," said the justice, coldly.

"But don't you see the object he had in view to get all of my witnesses out of my reach, so that he may control the whole property himself?"

"Eh, what is that you say about controlling property?" exclaimed the magistrate. "Will you profit, Mr. Tilbert, by the death of your cousin?"

As he put the question, Justice Goyle looked straight at his man. But John Tilbert had nerved himself and bore the gaze unflinchingly, as he replied: "Yes, in a pecuniary sense I will, but that I could be base enough to wish my cousin dead for the sake of entering upon the possession of his property—why, it is folly to even hint at such a thing. Come to Cedarbrook and inquire of any member of my household whether I did not look forward to the coming of my cousin with the greatest pleasure and delight, and if the shock occasioned by the announcement of his death was not a terribly severe one. Furthermore, I will say that I have been so successful in my financial ventures of late as to make it seem a still greater absurdity that I should stoop to such designs as those with which this thieving tramp accuses me. Look at his record and then at mine."

Justice Goyle was evidently sorely perplexed. He hesitated for a moment before expressing an opinion, and Mr. Tilbert took advantage of the opportunity to further bolster up his case.

"My own son," he went on, "came upon him in the woods, where he was companying with a common tramp, and this morning, when Doctor Hornway found him at my place, he knew his case would not stand investigation so he turned and ran like a coward."

To say that Eric's blood boiled while listening to these remarks only feebly expresses his feelings.

But he gritted his teeth, determined not to risk lowering himself in the opinion of the magistrate by an exhibition of temper. At the same time he strenuously strove to avoid an appearance of guilt, and stood with his shoulders squared, his shapely head thrown back and his fine gray eyes fixed fearlessly on his accusers.

Suddenly a ray of hope shot across his face.

"Will you ask Doctor Hornway to have his waitress questioned about that money Mr. Manners lost?"

"Frances!" exclaimed the doctor. "Why, she is as honest as the day. Besides, how could she steal the money? She wasn't alone in the room with the pocketbook, as this young rascal who calls himself Dane was."

"But she had a chance to go up there while Mr. Manners was out on his walk and I was down at breakfast," persisted Eric. "I remember that Mrs. Hornway rang the bell for her three times, and said she wondered what had become of her, before she answered it."

"Surely, Justice Goyle," interposed Mr. Tilbert, in a tone of vexation, "this is a very slight foundation on which to base so serious a charge. A poor girl's character should not be smirched to gratify a mere whim of a cornered scamp."

"Mr. Tilbert," responded the magistrate in meaning tones, "you seem strangely eager to cut off all

avenues of escape for the prisoner. I for my part find this a very interesting case, and while I do not feel justified in discharging the prisoner, I will not commit him fully until this matter of the servant has been investigated. Meantime I will adjourn the hearing until Monday morning."

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

As soon as Justice Goyle had announced his intention of postponing a decision on the case, Rob Manners crossed the room, and, putting a hand on Eric's shoulder, said earnestly: "I begin to think we have been mistaken, but rest assured I will see that strict justice is done the girl as well as yourself. The fact of your running away from Mr. Tilbert's is an unfortunate one, but if you are cleared from this other charge, no one will be more ready than I to take your part."

"Thank you," replied Eric, adding: "Perhaps it was foolish for me to bolt that way, but Mr. Tilbert had told his men to seize me, and I was afraid he was going to lock me up somewhere on the premises, where I wouldn't have the chance to get the hearing I have had today."

"Well, I hope from the bottom of my heart, you will come out all right," returned Manners. "In which case I will have a heavy pardon to ask."

"Come, Robert," called Doctor Hornway. "Mr. Tilbert is waiting for us."

The next instant our hero was left alone with the magistrate and the officer.

The former had risen from his desk and taken his hat from the closet at his left.

"Officer Locke," he said, "I will be answerable for this young man's appearance here on Monday."

Come," he added, turning to Eric, "I want you to come home with me."

It would be hard to say which was the more astonished, the officer or our hero, on being made aware of this intention on the part of the magistrate.

"But I thought, sir," the former ventured to remonstrate, "that he was to be lodged in a cell here in the jail. There's a very nice one, sir, next to the young fellow that's up for assault."

"Officer Locke," thundered the magistrate, "I have stated that I intend taking this young man home with me."

So saying, Justice Goyle, who was short in stature, thrust his arm through that of Eric and walked with him out of the building.

"This is very kind of you, sir," began Eric. "I am hardly fit, though, to go into a gentleman's house. I walked all the way from Cedarbrook, and as Mr. Tilbert has my trunk——"

"I understand exactly what's wanted," interposed the justice. "A whisk broom, a visit to the bath room, and some fresh linen, with all of which you can be provided. My family is away from home, so we will have the house to ourselves, at which, by the way, we are now arrived."

Opening the gate before a large frame house, with a square tower at one end, the justice led the way up to the front door, through which he ushered our hero with as much politeness as though the latter was a specially invited guest.

"Come up stairs with me, where I think I can fit you with some linen of my own. You look to be well grown for your age," and stepping into a handsomely furnished room at the head of the stairway, the magistrate selected a shirt, collar and cuffs, from a stock in the bureau drawer, and handed them to our hero.

"Here is the bath room," he furthermore explained, leading the way to the other end of the passage. "You will find every convenience for dressing here. I regret that the circumstances will compel me to lock you in, but I think you are sensible enough to understand the necessities of the case. If I return here in half an hour, will you be ready to go down with me to my study, where we can have a talk?"

"Yes, sir," answered Eric; whereupon the justice transferred the key from the inside to the outside of the bath room door and withdrew.

"Well, this is decidedly preferable to a 'dungeon cell,'" murmured our hero, as he heard the lock snap, "and I dare say I am an especially favored prisoner. I wonder what made this queer old magistrate take such a fancy to me! It's about time, though, somebody began to range himself on my side. It's strange I didn't think about that servant at the Hornways' before. Now for a good wash."

Thirty minutes later, when Justice Goyle tapped at the door, Eric announced himself as ready, and then expressed his deep obligations for the privileges that had been accorded him.

"Oh, that's all right," returned the justice, dismissing the subject with a wave of the hand. "Now I want you to tell me your whole story. Begin with the railroad accident."

They had taken seats in a room on the ground floor, which was Eric's ideal of a thoroughly home-like apartment, with its cheerful carpet, deep bay window, with a cushioned seat running all around it, a half dozen easy chairs, and a bookcase filled with volumes looking, every one of them, as though they had been read.

Amid these comfortable surroundings our hero told his tale to the magistrate as it has been told in

these pages to the reader. It required some time to do it, and before he reached the end the maid came in to light the gas. But Justice Goyle listened with close attention throughout, nodding his head now and then to show his appreciation of a point, and sometimes asking a question.

"Well," he said, when Eric had finished, "your claim is a good one, but your record is bad. Now, don't misunderstand me. It may be only your misfortune, but it does seem a pity that you could not tackle this Tilbert freed from such hindrances as this unfortunate affair at Doctor Hornway's."

Eric wanted to ask whether Justice Goyle believed that he really stole that money, but decided that under the circumstances it would hardly be the thing to do.

Supper was now announced, and Eric and the magistrate took seats, one at either end of a well spread table.

"I wonder he isn't afraid I may take it into my head to bolt," our hero could not help reflecting once or twice.

But the justice did not appear to worry himself on that score, and talked pleasantly of England, which, it seemed, he had visited the previous summer.

"Now, I dare say you are tired after your long walk," he said, shortly after they had adjourned to the library, "so I will show you to your room at once."

Eric was in truth quite worn out, and when he was left alone—of course locked in—in a pleasant room opposite the magistrate's own, he prepared for bed immediately.

Sleep, too, came speedily, and with it dreams of vindication and happy times with Fred Marchman. In one of them they seemed to be playing together in a game of football. Eric had tripped with the ball

in his arms, and three or four of his opponents, who were trying to collar him, had fallen over him.

The pressure awakened Eric finally, and he opened his eyes to find the Cedarbrook tramp bending over him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MIDNIGHT INTERVIEW.

"So it's you, is it?"

The tramp had placed his heavy hands on Eric's wrists, and thus pinned him helplessly to the bed. Then putting his repulsive face down close to that of our hero, he surveyed him triumphantly in the moonlight.

"What are you doing here?" asked Eric, sinking back after a few ineffectual struggles to escape from the iron grip that held him fast.

"I'm goin' ter make you open the door for me."

"What door?" inquired Eric, striving to gain time to try and think of what he would do.

"The door to this room. Yer knows werry well what I means," retorted the tramp, with an emphasizing pressure on the boy's wrists. "Come, fork over the key. I don't see what yer wanted ter take it out of the lock fer anyhow."

"I didn't take it out. You ought to know where it is, as you came in after I did."

"None of your imperdance, young feller. I didn't come in that way, but if you don't give up that key so I can get out by it, I'll—well, your throat is mighty tender and soft, and my hands—yer kin feel fer yerself how hard they be, so the two wouldn't make a pretty match of it, would they now?"

Eric shuddered in spite of himself. He knew from experience that the man was both cruel and reckless,

caring little what were the consequences to himself so long as his revengeful desires were gratified.

Our hero had thought of shouting for help, but the peculiar circumstances under which he had become the magistrate's guest made him hesitate before resorting to this course. Would not the justice think that he had admitted the tramp to the house in spite of all? He had doubtless not forgotten Mr. Tilbert's mention of that scene in the woods.

If he could only capture the fellow in some way and then summon the household! As it was, the chances were that should Eric raise an alarm the man would escape before anybody could reach the room, and our hero would then be obliged to make some awkward explanations.

Suddenly his mind reverted to the tramp's assertion that he had not come in by the door. How then had the fellow made his way into the room?

"How did you get in?" he inquired.

"You'd like ter know now, wouldn't yer?" returned the other, tauntingly. "Yer thought yer was all safe from such fellers as me when yer locked yer door. But I'm here, up on end, all the same. Now are yer goin' ter fork over that 'ere key, or do yer want me ter begin a little accorjeon playin' on that neck o' yourn?"

"I tell you I haven't got the key and couldn't open the door if I wanted to," exclaimed Eric in as loud a tone as he dared use. "If you don't go off now the way you came whatever it was, I'll——"

"Oh no, you won't holler, my precious," interrupted the tramp, "fer as soon as I see that daisy little mouth o' yours open wider than just so far, I'll begin to play that accorjeon tune that's so very soft that there ain't no noise at all to it. But what's that 'ere door doin' locked ef you ain't got the key to it?"

"Because it's locked on the outside," answered Eric, promptly, putting on a bold front. "Now you see how useless it is for you to waste your time around here."

"Then somebody's fastened you in, has he?" muttered the tramp. "What's that for? Are you so precious to 'em they're afraid somebody'll run off with you, or that you'll run off with the silver? What do you mean by it, eh? Here you've come brought me into a purty scrape," and the fellow shook Eric until the bed slats rattled.

"I brought you into a scrape?" repeated the latter, as soon as he was allowed to speak. "Why what have I got to do with it? Did I ask you to come here? Indeed, if I'd known what you had in view, I'd have warned you to keep away with the greatest pleasure in the world."

Eric spoke lightly, but at the same time, as may be readily imagined, he was in anything but a comfortable frame of mind. What if Justice Goyle should overhear the talking and come in to discover our hero's companion?

"Look here?" he went on, eagerly, "if you'll go away quietly now without taking anything, I won't say a word about your having been here."

"But how am I goin' ter get away?" the tramp wanted to know.

"The same way you came, of course," answered Eric, adding, as a sudden thought struck him: "You haven't been here ever since yesterday afternoon, have you? Hid under the bed or in the closet?"

"No, I'd only been here long enough to find that blamed door locked when you woke up."

"But how then did you get in, and what on earth's to prevent you're getting out the same way?" persisted Eric.

"Ssh! Don't talk so loud," cautioned the tramp.

Then releasing his hold on the boy's wrists, he continued: "Come here to the winder and I'll show you."

Thankful to be released from the confinement of his position, Eric rose with ready acquiescence, and slipping on some of his clothes, accompanied the tramp to one of the many windows with which the room was provided.

"Yer see that tree," whispered the man, pointing to a tall horse chestnut that stood near the house, "an' how that 'ere branch reaches over nearly to this winder?"

"Yes," assented Eric. "But you never could have jumped from that into the room here."

"Who said I did, young feller? But I did jump from as far out on the end of it as I da'st go, to the roof of that 'ere bay winder. Then it didn't take much to put my paws on this here winder sill and swing myself up inter the room. An' now do yer see why I can't go back—if I wanted ter, which I don't say as I do—the way I came?"

"But can't you let yourself down from the top of the bay window?" Eric suggested.

"Maybe I could, and sprain my ankle a doin' of it," returned the tramp, scornfully. "I mayn't be as good lookin' as you, young feller"—at this point he chucked Eric under the chin in an odiously familiar fashion—"nor have a skin so nice and soft, but I guess I could manage to feel a bump like that. Come, quick now, think of some way fer me ter get out of this. 'Tain't so long till mornin'."

In spite of its serious bearing on his own fortunes, Eric could not but reflect on the ridiculous side of the situation—the idea of a would be burglar asking his advice as to the best method of leaving the premises. But as he was as anxious to get rid of him as the tramp was to go, he tried hard to think of some

means by which he could get his midnight visitor off his hands without arousing Justice Goyle or the servants.

"Can't yer yell out that yer sick or somethin' and git them ter open the door?" suggested the tramp. "I can hide somewheres till the folks goes off, and then slip down stairs and out of the front door."

"Yes, and pocket a lot of the silver on the way," said Eric, beginning to put on the rest of his clothing, for the window was open and the night was chilly.

"No, I pledge yer my word," began the tramp, when Eric impatiently interrupted him.

"Your word?" he exclaimed. "Do you think I would trust a man like you for the eighth part of a second? And if I hadn't good reasons of my own for not doing so, I wouldn't hesitate a minute before giving the alarm. You haven't told me yet what you came here for. It was to steal, wasn't it?"

Eric had just finished putting on his coat as he asked the question, and now stood opposite the window, in the full play of the moonlight, looking fixedly at the ragged, hard featured man who had seated himself on a chair by the bureau. He gazed back silently for an instant at the boy, then gave a faint cry, or rather gasp, and dropped his head upon his hands.

Eric stared at the spectacle in undisguised wonder. What had come over the fellow?

He advanced a step or two nearer the bowed figure, and went on in the subdued undertone they had both been using: "Are you repenting now, when you are caught like a rat in a trap? But I won't be mean enough to taunt a fallen foe, even such a one as you."

"Oh, don't don't speak to me like that," exclaimed the tramp, quickly.

His tone was in startling contrast to that in which our hero had hitherto heard him speak. His face, too, had taken on an entirely new expression, and it seemed to Eric as though tears were coursing their way down the unshaven cheeks.

“Still I can’t blame you for despising me,” this very queer personage continued, in the same gentle voice ; “but perhaps you will understand why I feel it so, and have a little pity for me when you hear my story. Will you let me tell it to you?”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STRANGE TRANSFORMATION.

ERIC had been amazed when he awoke from that dream and found the tramp leaning over him, but now he was positively astonished, when he heard that same unkempt, rough speaking individual address him in the manner recorded at the close of the preceding chapter.

Before he could concentrate his mind sufficiently on the new order of things to frame an answer, the tramp had risen, placed a chair directly in front of the window, and then, drawing up the one he had himself occupied, he continued : " Won't you please sit down, right here in the moonlight, where I can see your face and imagine it is that of my little boy, who, it somehow seems to me, would have looked as you do, had he lived ? "

" But this is no time to listen to stories," Eric at length found voice to answer. " Somebody may overhear you talking, and you will be discovered."

" Let them take me, then. I care not what becomes of me, once I have won your pity. But what I have to say will not take long to tell. It is only the old, old story of drink desolating a happy home, breaking a wife's heart, and so leaving a little child motherless. How I idolized that boy, no words of mine can express ; and when we were left alone together, he and I, I broke loose from the enslaving demon that had held me fast, and vowed I would be a free man

for his sake. For five years I kept my vow. I moved to a distant Western city, where my boy and I lived in a happy companionship, the memory of which should have remained with me as a sacred legacy to keep me pure all my life. But at the end of those five years, when my boy was just ten, he fell sick and died, and since then I have been what you see me now."

The man paused for an instant, and seemed fairly to devour our hero with the earnestness of his gaze. He did not speak, and the tramp resumed :

"After I had buried my beautiful boy out of my sight forever, I felt that I had nothing left on earth to live for, took to drink again with a sort of ghastly glee, caring for nought but something in which to drown my sorrow. I was a doctor by profession, and naturally soon lost all my practice by my wild course. My property was next swept away, all but a hundred dollars or so I saved to bury me beside my boy when I die. I've got it safe here," tapping his breast, "hung from about my neck, with a letter of directions addressed to whoever finds my body. No temptation of hunger, cold, or longing for liquor, has been strong enough to induce me to break into it."

"But I should think you would have been robbed of it," said Eric, who was more affected by the story than he cared to show. "If you have led the life of a tramp very long——"

"Six years," interrupted the other, "and any companions I have had, have respected my muscle too highly to attempt an appropriation of any of my property. But I have never mingled with them much, and whenever I have undertaken any business like that of tonight, I have always been alone."

"Have you ever stolen anything?" Eric ventured to inquire. He thought the answer might be taken as a test of the other's sincerity.

"No, never a penny's worth. Perhaps you do not believe me, but I assure you such is the fact. Indeed this is only the second time I have entered a house in this burglarious fashion. The first was last Wednesday, when you found me in the cottage in Cedarbrook. I did it more for the excitement that brings forgetfulness of my grief than for purposes of plunder. Now do you believe my story and pity me, and will you sometimes think of me, not as I am, but as I would have been had my boy lived?"

It was certainly a strange scene, sitting up at the dead of night hearing the confessions of a burglar. But Eric felt instinctively that the man had opened his real heart to him. His sudden change to a refined manner of speech was proof positive in itself that he had once been a gentleman.

Conquering his aversion to the present repulsive appearance of the man, Eric now put out his hand and replied :

"Yes, I do believe and pity you, and shall try to forget that I ever looked upon you in any other light. But why won't you, for the sake of the memory of your boy, give up this life you are leading? I will help you to get away safely—I have just thought of a plan—and I want you to promise that you will do differently from now on."

The tramp seized the hand held out to him with both his own, and answered solemnly : "I will. Since this confession tonight I have become a horror to myself. The scales seem to have fallen from my eyes, and I now see the folly of my course as I never thought I should in this world. But I must go, for if I am discovered I feel that that discovery will in some way compromise you. Now for your plan."

Eric could not but be surprised at the altered manner of the man before him. His eye was now

lit up by hope, his shoulders thrown back and his whole aspect in striking contrast to the stolid, almost brutal one of a few moments previous. Such is the transformation capable of being wrought in the outward appearance by inward determination.

"If I take the spread from my bed and twist it into the shape of a rope, do you think you could lower yourself by it from the roof of the bay window to the ground?"

Our hero had suddenly recollected the device he had used for the sake of appearances at the Hornways', and thought that perhaps it might be made of practical service in the present instance.

"But there is nothing to fasten it to out there," objected the tramp.

"I'll hold you," replied Eric, promptly.

"But you can't. I weigh over a hundred and eighty pounds."

"No matter, I'm pretty strong, and we can get a leverage on the edge of the roof. I'll show you," and whipping the spread from the bed, Eric took it to the window and vaulted lightly out.

"See," he said, "that will let you down far enough so you can easily drop to the ground."

The tramp noiselessly took his place beside him, measured the distance with his eye, and answered: "Yes, I'll risk it."

The room to which Eric had been assigned was situated in the rear of the house, so that there was no possibility of their movements being observed by any chance passer by on the street.

"Good by. I'll never forget you, nor my promise," said the tramp the next moment. Then, letting himself over the edge of the roof, he hung by one hand till he had caught a good grip of the spread with the other.

"Lower away," he called softly to Eric.

The latter allowed the spread to slip through his hands inch by inch, till he reached the end.

"That's all," he whispered as loud as he dared.

"All right," was the reply from over the edge of the roof, and at the same instant the weight at the end of the improvised rope was removed.

Eric should have been prepared for this, but he was wondering at the moment whether it was possible that they were observed. He staggered backwards, one foot was over the side of the roof, and the next second he fell down, down, and then, mercifully, he knew nothing, felt nothing more.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS.

WHEN Eric again awoke to consciousness, his surroundings were all so strange that for the first few moments he knew not whether it was a coming back to life in this world, or his introduction into that of another.

He was lying on a bed in a room which was the greatest possible contrast to the one he had lately occupied at Justice Goyle's. There was neither plaster on the walls nor carpet on the floor, and the one window which was within his range of vision had but a single whole pane of glass among the four of which it was composed. But a fire burned brightly on the hearth, and a flood of golden autumn sunshine filled the homely apartment.

Eric started to raise himself on his elbow to gain a more extended view, but fell back with a gasp of pain. He then discovered that his left arm was in splints, and hung from his neck in a sling. This brought back the recollection of his fall from the top of the bay window.

But it was in vain that he tried to bridge over the gap between that event and the present moment.

Whose house was this, where was it situated, and how had he been brought there?

All he could see of the outside world through the window was the trunks of trees and the rounded top of a bush or two. There was not a sound to be heard

save the crackling of the brushwood fire and the song of a cheerful robin, perched on the window sill.

"I must have broken my arm," mused Eric. "It's a wonder I didn't break my back or my neck. But how did I get here, and what sort of a place is it?"

Carefully he raised himself to a sitting posture, and gazed around him. And the first objects on which his eyes fell caused him increased astonishment, for there, close by the bed stood a table neatly spread with a snow white cloth and containing a breakfast service of sugar bowl, cream-pitcher, napkin, cup and saucer.

"I wonder if that's meant for me," thought Eric. "It looks so, so here goes. I feel as hollow as a pneumatic tube," and stretching out his hand, he took a lump of sugar from the bowl and began to crunch it hungrily.

Evidently attracted by the noise this made, some one entered the room from an adjoining one through a doorway at the head of the bed.

The next moment Eric paused with his hand outstretched a second time toward the sugar bowl, and looked up to see a gentleman standing in front of him, whom at the first glance he took to be an utter stranger.

"I was so hungry," he said, half apologetically, "that I had to begin on sugar."

"I should rather expect you would be hungry," was the reply, "and I'll hurry up a more substantial breakfast for you."

Before Eric could get a chance to put one of the many questions he wanted to ask, the gentleman had disappeared.

But Eric had had time to recognize in him the former tramp, not by his appearance, but by his voice. If he had not spoken our hero felt that it was

long odds that he would not have had the faintest clew to his identity.

His chin was clean shaven, he had a becoming mustache, his hair had been cut and—it is needless to add—his face and hands washed. He was dressed in a neat suit of black, while, judging from the hasty glance Eric had been able to bestow on it, his linen was irreproachable.

“How has he found time to make such a hasty transformation in himself since last night?” our hero wondered. “It can’t be much more than ten o’clock now, and besides, today is Sunday, when he wouldn’t be able to buy anything.”

But Eric’s thoughts were now deflected into a more selfish channel by the reappearance of the late tramp with a cup of coffee and a most tempting bit of broiled steak.

“Now, my boy, fall to,” he said, as he placed the dishes on the table, drew the latter close up to the bed, and cut the meat in small pieces. “I’ll bring the fried potatoes and omelette right in.”

Eric didn’t stop to do any wondering, but picking up the fork proceeded to fortify the inner man against any calls the unknown future might make upon it.

“That’s right; you’re coming on famously,” exclaimed the metamorphosed knight of the road, entering with the rest of the breakfast. “And now I’m going to sit down and comfortably enjoy the spectacle of your rapid convalescence. But stay, does your arm pain you any?”

“Yes, some. What’s the matter with it? Did I break it in that fall?”

“No, but you came very near it.”

“But how did I get here? Whose house is this? And—and oh, there’s lots I want to know, for I can’t remember a thing that happened after I fell off that

roof. I must have had a narrow escape from being killed outright."

"That you had. It was only a box bush that saved you. There was one growing close beside that bay window, and you fell plump on top of it."

"And what happened then? Did I make any noise? Did anybody in the house come to the windows?"

"Not a soul. I saw you fall, and tried to catch you, but was just too late."

"You haven't told me yet, though, how I got here and whose house this is, and to whom I am indebted for this splendid breakfast."

"Well, as to how you got here, I carried you like a baby in my arms. You were unconscious, of course, but I knew at once that your arm was sprained, and I determined to bring you out to this cabin and doctor you up myself, as it was my fault that you came to need the doctoring. The shanty belonged to an old hermit for whom I used to do a friendly turn now and then, and on whom I waited when he was very sick last month. His son came and took him to his own home out West, but before he went he gave me the key of this tumble down old place, and leave to live here if I wanted to. So here I brought you, and have felt like a new man ever since I had a boy again to care for and wait upon."

"But where——" Eric paused in some embarrassment, with his eyes roving from the other's clothes to the well spread table.

"Oh, of course you want to know how it was possible for a poor tramp to do even the little that has been done. That is easily explained since you already know about that burial fund I have been carrying about with me for so long. Well, now that I have determined to turn over a new leaf, it will be no longer necessary for me to save it."

"I am as grateful as I can be for all you've done for me. My name is Eric Dane, and I hope some day to be able to——"

"No, don't talk of settling scores with Philip Blendford. He owes you more than he can ever in his life repay. Your being now so well and cheerful, after lying there all day yesterday in that strange stupor, is——"

"All day yesterday!" exclaimed Eric, in a horror stricken voice.

"Why, yes; didn't you know that today was Monday? How else did you think I would have been able to buy these clothes, dishes, and so on?"

"And what time is it now?"

"Well, I should say it was about eleven o'clock."

"Then the case has come on, and Justice Goyle will have no more doubts about my having taken that money."

"Taken money?" ejaculated Philip Blendford in amazement. "You a *thief*!" and the tone in which the word was spoken was one which Eric never forgot.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CALL OF HONOR.

"I MUST go to South Oxford at once," Eric went on after an instant. "How far is it?" and he started to leave the bed so hurriedly that he gave his injured arm a wrench and was forced to fall back with a cry of pain.

"There, there, my boy," said Philip Blendford, gently. "I will help you all I can to set matters right, if you will only lie quiet and explain what the trouble is."

"But how can I lie quiet when I have as good as broken bail, repaid Justice Goyle's kind heartedness with what must seem to him gross ingratitude, and very likely made it impossible for me to prove my right to my own name? I *must* see what can be done."

"Then I will go with you. I'll help you into your clothes, and you can do your explaining as we go along. It's only a little over a mile to the town, and I think we can get there before noon."

Fifteen minutes later, Eric, leaning on the arm of the man who had but a few days before caused him such disquietude, issued from the cabin, looking very pale, and walking at first with tottering steps.

But the bright sunshine was invigorating, the air was fresh and full of tonic, and gradually our hero's strength returned to him. Meanwhile he told Doctor Blendford his story, beginning with the railroad ac-

cident and ending with his going home with the magistrate on Saturday night.

"And now how am I to explain matters to him?" he concluded.

"Leave that to me," said Doctor Blendford. "I was the cause of the misfortune, and with me should rest the responsibility of repairing the damage done."

"But I do not want you to get yourself into difficulties on my account," went on Eric. "They will of course want you to explain why you entered the magistrate's house, and then you——"

"Will state the facts of the case and be ready to accept the consequences," finished the other. "My new leaf wouldn't be worth much if it wasn't stout enough to hold out against the tests to which the weaknesses of the old ones are sure to subject it. But here we are at the town. Where shall we go? To Justice Goyle's residence, or the court house?"

"Oh, to the court house," responded Eric at once. "See, the clock on that steeple points to only half past eleven. You must have been mistaken when you told me the time, and perhaps the case hasn't come on yet."

"I could only guess at the hour, and am very glad to find I was so far out on the right side."

"There's Mr. Tilbert now," exclaimed Eric the next moment.

They had come in sight of the building where our hero's examination had taken place on Saturday. There, sure enough, stood Mr. Tilbert's buggy at the door, while Mr. Tilbert himself, a smile of triumph on his usually impassive countenance, was crossing the sidewalk toward it.

Eric and his companion quickened their steps and reached the spot just as the gentleman from Cedarbrook was about to enter his carriage.

"Mr. Tilbert!" called out our hero.

The other turned, and the look of mingled wrath and disappointment that instantly succeeded to the one of triumph, was not lost on either of the new comers.

"Umph! So you've turned up at last, have you, you young jail breaker?" he muttered. "And damaged your arm in making your escape, eh?" he added, as his glance fell on the sling.

"Does it seem reasonable to suppose that if I had deliberately broken jail, I should come back here to present myself before Justice Goyle?" And Eric squared his shoulders in so far as his disabled arm would permit, and looked his cousin straight in the eye. Then he turned quickly, and entered the building with his new found friend.

The magistrate was seated alone at his desk, and started perceptibly when he saw his visitors. Eric, however, did not give him an opportunity to speak his mind, but began at once:

"Am I in time for that examination, Justice Goyle? I can easily imagine what you must think of me, and how very black my character must now look in your eyes; but I have come to ask you if you will hear my story before you judge me."

"I do not expect Dr. Hornway until noon," replied the magistrate, gravely, adding, as his eye rested on the sling: "I see you have been hurt. Will you be seated while you explain matters?"

Eric gladly sank into the nearest chair, while Blendford took his place beside him like a guardian spirit.

"I need not say I was surprised," went on the justice, in his peculiar voice, "when I discovered that you were not in that room yesterday morning, and afterwards found the knotted spread and other evidences of the manner in which your escape had

been effected. But I would like to say that I was deeply pained to feel that my confidence had been so sadly misplaced. Then, again, I say nothing beyond mentioning the fact that I had become personally responsible for your appearance here this morning. Now for your explanation, if you please."

Thereupon Blendford interposed with: "I am solely responsible, sir, for the circumstances that have placed him in such an unfortunate light. I entered your house by the second story window, found the door locked on the outside, and was won from my original intention by this young man, who then undertook to assist me in making my escape from the roof of the bay window. In doing so, he lost his balance and fell to the ground, and had it not been for the box bush he would undoubtedly have sustained serious injuries. As it was, he sprained his arm, and as I did not care to have the family disturbed, and at that time knew nothing of the circumstances under which he had become an inmate of your home, I picked him up—for he was unconscious—and carried him off to a cabin in the woods where I sometimes stay. And from that time until about an hour ago he remained insensible."

"This is a most extraordinary story," ejaculated the magistrate, as Blendford paused. "Doubly astonishing since you come here and tell it yourself, which fact, perhaps it is unnecessary for me to add, goes a great way toward convincing me of its truth. You are prepared, I suppose, to pay the penalty for housebreaking."

"I am," replied Blendford, firmly. "But Eric Dane here, I hope he——"

"He must still meet the charge preferred against him by Mr. Robert Manners," interrupted the justice, adding, as a step was heard in the hall: "and here is that gentleman himself, come to press it."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE TRAIL AGAIN.

"No, not to press, but to withdraw it," exclaimed Manners, walking up to Eric and shaking him heartily by the hand.

"Have you found the money, then?" cried our hero, joyfully.

"Yes, as soon as Frances was accused of taking it she broke down and confessed. She said she wanted it for a good purpose and had never stolen before, which were certainly both poor excuses enough; but because of her promptness to confess and as a favor to my aunt, I have decided not to prosecute the girl. But what has happened to your arm, Eric?"

"My fortunes have taken another turn at sporting with me as if I was a football," answered our hero, with a faint smile. "Before I was fairly out of one predicament I have been plunged into another."

"Well, as I promised you on Saturday, I'm ready now to stick by you through thick and thin. What is it this time? Another attack on your character by Tilbert?"

"No, I think that might be more easily disposed of," responded Eric. Then, as Justice Goyle was engaged in conversation with Blendford, he told Manners the whole story.

"Jove," muttered the latter, on its conclusion, "you *are* in a fix, aren't you? But to think of that

queer old duffer of a magistrate taking you home with him! I'm mighty glad he did it, though, for it saved you from being jailed."

"I almost wish now he'd let me stay here," interjected Eric. "Then I couldn't have got into this scrape. I seem to be a fearful blunderer, some way. Do you think I ought to have roused up the magistrate when I found the tramp in the room?"

"Well, I don't know that I would have done it if I had been in your place myself; but it seems, as things have turned out, that that would have been the wiser course."

"Then Doctor Blendford would probably have been a tramp still, so that's one consolation I can have for doing just as I did," said Eric resignedly. Then he added: "Did you meet Mr. Tilbert in his buggy just now?"

"No; was he here?"

"Yes, I met him just as I came in, and he looked terribly disappointed when he saw I'd turned up. But think of him going to the expense of sending that McQuillam fellow off to the Maine woods!"

"I don't believe he sent him there at all," said Manners. "He's just given out that he's away off there, so that his family can't communicate with him and so be able to give his address to you."

"Where do you think he is, then?" asked Eric, eagerly.

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if he had sent him off with his boys to some place near by. You see, he evidently hoped to have you jailed or frightened out of the neighborhood in the course of a few days."

At this point in the conversation, Justice Goyle beckoned to Eric.

"It is all right," he said, "you need not wait any longer. Relatives of my wife live in that Western town where Doctor Blendford used to practice, and

now that he has told me his story, I remember hearing them speak of the case. Of course the strictly legal course for you to pursue would have been to call me ; but so much good has evidently come out of the matter as it stands—excepting your sprained arm—that I do not feel disposed to find fault. I suppose now you will wish to see Mr. Tilbert. Doctor Blendford I am going to keep with me for a few days.”

“Now, Eric, I want to fulfill the promise I made to you before that unlucky pocket book incident. But, by Jove, if I haven’t forgotten to give you back the money,” and Rob Manners, who had come forward to learn the magistrate’s decision, plunged both hands into his pockets.

“There,” he said, extending a crisp five dollar bill to our hero, “you see I was the thief after all ; but if you’ll promise not to prosecute, I’ll ferret out that McQuillam’s hiding place for you, if it takes me all the fall.”

Eric laughed, and then introduced Manners to Blendford. The latter manifested some anxiety as to the welfare of Eric’s arm, but our hero declared that he hadn’t thought of it for the last half hour, so that it must be decidedly better.

“Oh, I’ll see that he doesn’t neglect it,” broke in Manners. “I’m going to take this young heir off with me on the—let me see,” (looking at his watch) “12:15 train, which we’ve just time to catch, so come ahead, my son.”

“But, Justice Goyle,” stammered Eric, “I’ve got your——”

“Oh, never mind about that,” returned the magistrate, with a smile.

“I’ll fix it up later, then,” said Eric. “Good by, Doctor Blendford. I am ever so much obliged for all you’ve done for me. If you’ll leave your address

with Justice Goyle, I'd like to send for you when I get established in my rights. Good by till then."

The next minute Eric and young Manners were hurrying off to the station.

But just before reaching the latter, Eric exclaimed: "Why can't we stop at Cedarbrook and find out if the Tilbert boys have really gone off as you suppose?"

"But Tilbert wouldn't let us know if they had," returned Manners. "He will probably be suspicious of everybody now."

"There's Charley Shaw, though," went on Eric. "He's a great friend of Percy Tilbert's. I met him when I stayed over night at the Bluff House. We might find out from him without going near the Dane place."

"That's the very thing! We'll stop over at the Bluff House for dinner, and then catch the next train down."

So tickets were bought for Cedarbrook, and during the trip Eric pointed out the apple orchard which had helped him through a tight place, as he expressed it, and the woods to which he had fled on that Saturday morning.

"How does your arm feel now, Eric?" inquired Manners, when they were alighting from the cars at the well remembered little station.

"Oh, it pin pricks me a bit, but I've got so much on my mind just now that there's hardly room for even pains to get in," laughed Eric, as he took the other's arm to walk up the hill.

He noticed that the old flagman looked at him rather sharply, and he wondered whether he was remembered as the irreverent youth who spoke lightly of the dead.

On reaching the Bluff House and inquiring for Charley Shaw, they ascertained that the family had moved back to their city home that morning.

"Can you give me their New York address?" Eric asked of the clerk.

"Certainly," was the reply. "They left it with me in case any letters should come for them."

"Then we will call on this Charley as soon as we reach town," said Manners. "We must work quickly or Tilbert will sniff a mouse and forestall us."

But as the next down train did not leave until 1:45 there was time enough to take dinner at the Bluff House, as they had planned. Quarter to three found them at the Shaw residence in Fifty First Street.

"Yes, Master Charley was in," the girl said, and when the boy came down he recognized Eric at once, and seemed very glad to see him.

Our hero introduced his friend, and then briefly stated the object of their call.

"Why, yes," exclaimed Charley. "That was one reason I was so willing to come back to town early, Percy's being away. His father sent him off to camp out at Spring Lake very suddenly last Saturday."

"Do you know who went with him?" asked Eric, eagerly.

"Yes; their tutor, and some fellow from South Oxford. I went down to the station to see the boys off, and they told me that this chap was to be on the train and join their party."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BY THE SEA.

MR. ROB MANNERS could scarcely restrain himself from leaping to his feet with a cry of triumph when Charley Shaw made the announcement recorded at the close of the last chapter.

It is very pleasant under ordinary circumstances to have one's predictions verified ; but when one is a lawyer, and engaged on a case involving some amateur detective work, the pleasure is enhanced ten-fold.

Eric was greatly excited, too, and his voice fairly quivered as he breathlessly inquired :

"Did Percy mention the name of this young fellow ? "

"No ; and he didn't seem especially delighted with the idea of his going along. He didn't want to go himself very much, any way, I guess."

"But how far is Spring Lake from here ? " went on Eric the next minute. "Perhaps we're no better off now than if he was in the woods of Maine, except that we've got a definite post office address to write to."

"Better off !" exclaimed Manners. "I should say we were. Why," taking out his watch, "Spring Lake is only some thirty miles from here on the Jersey coast, just below Long Branch, and we'll have time to catch the 3:45 boat, and be there by six o'clock tonight. We're ever so much obliged to

you, Mr. Shaw, and we'll give Master Percy your very best regards, shall we?"

"Yes, and tell him I miss him like fun."

"Now, my dear boy," said Manners, enthusiastically, as soon as they were in the street, "we'll clinch matters very shortly. Come around with me to my rooms, where I can get brushes, combs, collars, and so on, and then we'll go down and spend the night where your presence will cause a bombshell of surprise to somebody, if I'm not very much mistaken."

"But I'm taking up entirely too much of your time—and money," Eric objected. "How much is the fare to this place? You've paid out enough for me already. I feel quite rich now, you know, with five dollars in my pocket, as against five cents a little while back."

"Now, look here, young man," retorted Manners, "you're an invalid and ought to be stretched out on the lounge in my den at this very minute, instead of talking of traveling off by yourself to a place you've never seen, and only heard of ten minutes ago. Oh, never fear but I'll manage to make you pay me for my services in one way or another when you come into possession of that snug little million or two. But here we are," and the young lawyer led the way into the corridor of a handsome bachelor apartment building.

Here they took the elevator to one of the upper floors, where Manners had a suite of rooms most luxuriously fitted up. However, there wasn't much time in which to inspect them, for their possessor commanded Eric to lie down on the sofa to which he had alluded and rest his arm, while he (Manners) got some things together and packed in his usual race horse fashion.

"When are we coming back?" inquired our hero, as they started for the pier.

"I hope we can get that McQuillam fellow to come with us to Cedarbrook tomorrow morning. I'm taking a little vacation from business, you know, but I can't very well be away from my office beyond Tuesday, and I don't want to miss the expression on that Tilbert's face when you confront him with the chap who can positively identify you."

"It will be rather awkward, though, for him to receive me—and for me, too for the matter of that, won't it?" remarked Eric, reflectively. "I'm afraid he's not going to be a very pleasant person to live in the house with."

"Oh, he's a very agreeable man and a great favorite with his neighbors, I hear, so I dare say when he finds that he must acknowledge you he will make the best of it, and come up to the mark like a gentleman."

"But he must be an out and out rascal to do as he has done," persisted Eric.

"I'm inclined to doubt that now," rejoined Manners. "I've been thinking it over since I met the man, and have about come to the conclusion that he took the course he did in a moment of sudden temptation. That is, he honestly believed that you had been destroyed beyond recognition until your card was brought in to him the day after the accident. Then, knowing that he had in his possession not only your private papers, but your trunk as well, he made up his mind on the instant that he would persuade himself that you were an impostor."

By this time the train had reached Rector Street, and soon afterward the two were enjoying a sail down the bay on the swift going steamer St. Johns. They changed to the cars at Sandy Hook, were whirled through fashionable Sea Bright, lengthy Monmouth Beach, and so on to Long Branch, Elberon, Asbury Park and——

“Spring Lake!” called out the conductor.

Eric was by this time in a high state of excitement. Was it possible that this all important witness would again slip through his fingers just as the latter were about to close upon him?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FACE TO FACE AT LAST.

ERIC was feverishly impatient as they left the cars, and was for plunging at once into the woods in search of the camp and "Hoddy."

"Let's go over to the hotel first, and inquire for the Tilbert party," suggested Manners. "I dare say they go there for their meals. Perhaps we'll find them at dinner now."

After a short ride in the omnibus along the shores of a lake picturesquely fringed with a forest of pine trees, and dotted here and there with the gay craft of pleasure parties, they alighted at the Monmouth House and secured rooms, and then inquired if the clerk happened to know of a party consisting of the two Tilbert boys, their tutor, and a friend, who had come down on Saturday to camp out in the woods adjoining the hotel.

"Why, yes," was the reply. "They didn't bring anything but a tent and bedding, and come over here to eat. I dare say you'll find them on the beach now."

"Come on, Eric," exclaimed Manners, on hearing this. "The sandy borders of the Atlantic will be quite a romantic spot on which to have the recognition take place, besides providing a harmless surface on which Mr. McQuillam may drop when he sees you."

Leaving the satchel to be taken up stairs by a

hall boy, Eric and his champion hurried off in the direction of the booming breakers.

"Aha, this is fine, isn't it?" murmured Manners, sniffing in the salt air with unconcealed satisfaction. "Now do you see any of your friends or enemies, I scarcely know which to call them?"

"Oh, Percy Tilbert is a boy I'm very fond of, and we were fast friends before his father forbade him to have anything to do with me. By George, there he is now!"

"And is McQuillam with him?" cried Manners, nearly as much excited as was Eric himself.

"I can't make out yet. See that group sitting on the sand just in front of the last bath house in the row, and the boy standing beside them with his hands wide apart, as if he was showing how big a fish he has caught? Well, that's Percy, and I hope one of the fellows he's talking to is the chap I'm after."

Hastening over the sands, the two soon drew near enough to the group for Eric to distinguish the reddish hair and stocky figure of the young butcher. He was sitting with his back to the newcomers, looking up at Percy.

"Let's walk around to the other side and stand where he can see me," whispered Eric.

Accordingly the two skirted the group, then took up their station close by, and pretended to be gazing with great intentness on some distant object out at sea.

No notice was taken of them for the moment, everybody being absorbed in the story Percy was telling. But when this was ended, McQuillam turned his head and his eyes fell on Eric.

With a half shriek, half groan, he sprang to his feet, staggered back a few paces, then dropped in a heap on the sand.

With an irrepressible cry of joy Eric rushed forward.

"You thought it was my ghost, didn't you?" he cried, stooping over his late seat mate. "But here, give me your hand and I'll pull you on your legs again, and show that there is some substance to me."

"But you are—you weren't killed!" ejaculated Hoddy, regarding our hero with a stare of incredulous amazement.

"Not a bit of it," rejoined the latter, heartily.

"Why, I've told Mr. Tilbert that you were burnt up in that car, and——"

"I know you did, and that's the reason I've been chasing you all over the State. I want you to come back with me and tell him you are mistaken."

"Who is it? Tell me who it is."

Percy was clamoring to have the mystery explained to him.

"Why, it is your cousin, Eric Dane," replied Hoddy.

"But papa told me not—not to have anything to do with him," went on Percy, lowering his voice as Rob Manners joined Eric.

"He did!" exclaimed Hoddy, looking puzzled.

"I think I can explain the reason of that," interposed the young lawyer, who had overheard the words. "Mr. Tilbert, believing his cousin to have been cremated in the railway accident, took my young friend here for an impostor, as he was left without any means of proving his identity."

"You found my pocketbook, you know," added Eric, turning to Hoddy. "That had all my papers, letters and the check to my trunk in it, so I've had a hard time of it for a week, and have been knocked about like a football. At last I found out you were here, and I came down to get you to go back with

me to Cedarbrook tomorrow morning. How long were you to stay here?"

"As long as we wanted to," answered Percy. "But I'm tired of it now. It's cold sleeping in a tent these nights. Let's all go back tomorrow, Mr. Fox, can't we?"

Mr. Fox, who was evidently the tutor, was a bright looking young fellow of twenty two or thereabouts. He, in common with a handsome boy of ten, Everett Tilbert, had listened to the foregoing conversation with amazed intentness.

"Well," he said, "I think the matter is quite important enough to warrant us in breaking up our camping project, at least temporarily."

"Good," cried Percy, "and now let's all go in to supper."

"Second the motion," and Manners walked off in the direction of the hotel with the heir of the Tilberts, with whom the mention of Charley Shaw's name was an "*open sesame*" to a speedy acquaintanceship.

Eric followed with Hoddy and the others.

"And so you got off with only a damaged arm," said the young butcher, nodding his head toward the sling.

"Oh, I hurt this night before last in a fall," replied Eric. "I got out of the accident with scarcely a scratch. But I thought you had gone to the Maine woods."

"We were going there first, but Mr. Tilbert thought it was too late in the season to go so far away, so we came down here instead, and I've had a jolly good time."

The six managed to have a "jolly good time" of it at dinner, and afterwards Eric and Manners went over to inspect the "camp." After a half hour's stay there, the latter declared that the "invalid" must

go to bed, in order to refresh his nerves for the excitement of the morrow.

"I'll stay and help these fellows pack up," he added.

So our hero went off to his room at the hotel, but it was long before he could compose himself to sleep.

The next day the entire party embarked on an early train for New York, where they arrived just in time to catch another for Cedarbrook.

At Rob Manners's request, no word of their coming had been sent to Mr. Tilbert.

Percy was almost as excited as Eric himself.

"Papa will feel terribly about having treated you the way he did," he said. "But he didn't know, and you won't—won't be cross about it, will you?"

Eric thought of the week of anxiety, suspense and privation through which he had passed, of the insults and indignities that had been heaped upon him. Could he overlook all this?

Then he glanced down at the wistful face beside him, waiting so eagerly for his answer. He pictured to himself the results in the family of exposure of his father's scheming, then——

"No, Percy," he answered. "I hope your father and I will be friends after this."

On reaching the house, Everett was sent in search of Mr. Tilbert.

"Don't tell him who's here, but just say we've come back with a surprise for him," Percy cautioned. "We'll wait in the library."

"I feel kind of sheepish," remarked Hoddy, breaking a silence that the ticking of the bell shaped clock on the mantel only rendered the more intense. "It seems I've stirred up an awful muss, and nobody's got any good out of it but me. That'll make folks think I did it a purpose, won't it?"

Before anybody could assure him on this score, the *portieres* of the doorway leading into the dining room were pulled aside, and Mr. Tilbert entered. He took two or three steps toward Mr. Fox, as if to demand of him the meaning of this sudden return, when his eye fell on Eric and Hoddy, seated on the sofa side by side.

"Ha!" This single expression escaped the magnate's lips, then his face grew suddenly pale, and he put one hand on the revolving bookcase, as if to steady himself.

"Here's your cousin, Mr. Tilbert," began Hoddy, abruptly, rising and putting his hand on Eric's shoulder. "He wasn't killed after all, but it seems I've made it pretty rough for him by telling you that I thought he was. You're awfully surprised, aren't you? I don't wonder, for——Great Scott!"

Hoddy rushed forward as he saw the man he was addressing sway and reel, and then lurch forward. Hoddy caught him in his arms, and let him gently down upon the floor.

Of course all was confusion in a moment. Percy flew off to call his mother, Mr. Fox ran to the telephone to summon the doctor, while Eric and Manners chafed the unconscious man's wrists.

While thus engaged, our hero noticed something of which he did not speak until afterwards, and then only to Fred Marchman.

Mrs. Tilbert, a sweet faced, motherly looking woman, now came hurrying in, accompanied by the butler and two or three terrified maids.

"John, John," she said, softly, kneeling on the carpet, and taking one of her husband's hands in both of hers.

"Eric! Where is Eric?" he murmured faintly, looking around.

Percy whispered something in his mother's ear,

and then the latter beckoned to our hero. She pressed his hand warmly, and caused him to kneel down beside her."

Mr. Tilbert opened his eyes, fixed them on Eric, and then, stretching out his hand, whispered hoarsely: "Welcome!"

* * * * *

Two months later. The lawns and sidewalks at Cedarbrook were strewn with dry, crisp leaves, which the autumn gales sent scurrying back and forth with angry rustlings. The gates of Elmhurst were closed, the Tilberts having removed to their city home. Eric had spent a very pleasant fortnight there, after that second Tuesday of his arrival in America. Mr. Tilbert had speedily recovered from his shock of surprise, and thereafter nothing could exceed his kindness to our hero, whom he persisted in alluding to as one "miraculously restored from the dead."

"You promised to tell me what that was you saw when your Cousin John had the fainting spell, 'Ric,'" said Fred Marchman, as the two were being whirled along in the fast express, on their way home from college for the Thanksgiving holidays. "Come, tell me now, or you'll forget what it was."

"You'll never breathe it to a soul, not even your wife—when you get one?"

"Never," laughed Fred in reply, "nor even babble it to my grandchildren in my garrulous old age."

"Well, then, while Manners and I were chafing my cousin's wrists, I happened to look in his face and saw one of his eyes open just the least little bit, and——"

"You think——"

"That that fit business was all a forced affair to bridge over the awkward chasm between Eric the impostor and Eric the heir. It was a very happy

thought, too, and was the first good turn John Tilbert ever did me."

We have only to add that our hero, in his prosperity, did not forget those who had stood by him in his adversity, for how could he do so, when it is impossible to banish from his memory that eventful week when he was THE FOOTBALL OF FORTUNE?

THE END.

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